

SEASON TWO
**SOLAR
STORM**



MARCUS RICHARDSON

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SOLAR STORM

Season 2

Episode 1: CONTACT

MARCUS RICHARDSON

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Episode 1: *IMPACT*

Episode 2: *NORTHERN LIGHTS*

Episode 3: *FAITH*

Episode 4: *ENDURANCE*

Episode 5: *HOME*

Solar Storm Season 1 (Episodes 1-5)

Season 2: DARKNESS FALLS

Episode 1: *CONTACT*

Episode 2: *TRAPPED*

THE WILDFIRE SAGA

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Extinction is the rule. Survival is the exception.

—Carl Sagan

CME defined: Coronal mass ejections (or CMEs) are huge bubbles of gas threaded with magnetic field lines that are ejected from the Sun over the course of several hours... Coronal Mass Ejections disrupt the flow of the solar wind and produce disturbances that strike the Earth with sometimes catastrophic results... Coronal mass ejections are often associated with solar flares and prominence eruptions but they can also occur in the absence of either of these processes... The frequency of CMEs varies with the sunspot cycle. At solar minimum we observe about one CME a week. Near solar maximum we observe an average of 2 to 3 CMEs per day.

—NASA, Marshall Space Flight Center

<https://solarscience.msfc.nasa.gov/CMEs.shtml>

Solar Storm CONTACT

CHAPTER 1

LEAH CANTRELL STRETCHED AS much as she could in the Tahoe's passenger seat. She'd been cramped up in the car with everyone else since they'd abandoned their neighborhood a few hours ago. A glance at the dashboard told her it was almost 5 a.m.

She rested her head against the seat and closed her eyes for a second. It's almost time for sunrise. *Thank God—I don't think I can stay awake any longer.*

"You still with me, *priya*?" her father muttered from the driver's seat.

Leah's eyes fluttered open. "I'm awake," she said. She rubbed her eyes and sat up. "How are you doing?"

Jay Cantrell removed one bandaged hand from the wheel and flexed his fingers, wincing. "I've definitely been better...but having Kate back makes a big difference, you know?"

A smile came to Leah's lips as soon as he mentioned Kate. "I know—it's amazing. I still can't believe it..."

Her father smiled, his face an odd mixture of stubbly beard, cuts, and grime—badges of honor earned on his journey to rescue her at college when the coronal mass ejection shut down the power grid. His face looked so different than the normal, clean shaven face she'd known and loved her whole life.

Jay Cantrell had changed in other ways too: he'd become more assertive and more protective of her and Kate. She'd never so much as heard her father raise his voice, but before they left home, he'd killed the man who took Kate prisoner in a botched attempt to steal their vehicle.

Leah rested her chin on her hand and stared out at the still-dark landscape. The occasional bump in the road jostled her, and her forehead thumped against the window.

I saw that guy go down when you pulled the trigger, and I'm not even that upset about it. He deserved what he got...so what's changed more: the world, you, or me?

"You think it'll ever go back to normal?" Leah whispered. The last thing she wanted to do was wake anyone else up. Sleep had become a precious commodity among the group. They'd all gotten used to sleeping with one eye open to be ready for threats in the middle of the night.

"I don't know, honey...I just don't know."

Leah was about to say something further when she spotted a glint of light in the distance. "What's that?"

"What's what?"

"I saw something," she said. "A flash."

Her father looked up out the windshield. "More aurora?"

"No, more like a flashlight, I think." Leah leaned forward in her seat, now fully awake. "Look! There's cars parked across the road!"

"It's a roadblock," Jay observed.

"Dad, stop."

"No, don't do that—just slow down a little," Kate said, her voice thick with sleep. Her groggy face appeared between the two front seats. "If we stop, whoever's at that roadblock will know we've spotted them."

"What's going on?" muttered Thom.

"Whatever it is, it can't be good if everybody's whispering," replied Hunter, his voice disembodied in the darkness.

"There's a roadblock up ahead, so we're slowing down to not give away that we've seen them," Jay announced. "What do we do, guys?"

"Well," began Leah, "we have two options, right? We can drive up to them and see what's going on—maybe they'll let us through, or even warn us about the danger up ahead—"

"Or maybe they're just waiting to capture anybody who has gas. Maybe they want to steal from us...or worse," added Kate.

"So we either go through them or around them?" asked Thom.

"Leah, get the map," muttered Jay.

She followed her father's suggestion and pulled out their folded, well-worn map, a gift from the Tahoe's previous owner. She reached for the flashlight in the cup holder, but Kate grabbed her hand.

"Don't use that—any light you shine inside the car will be seen from a long ways away."

"Then how am I supposed to see the map?"

"Thom, give me your coat," Kate said over her shoulder.

After some muttering and rustling fabric, Kate shoved Thom's coat through the gap between the front seats. "Take this, drape it over your head, and lean over the map. When you turn on the light, it'll be trapped inside the coat with you. That way no one outside will be able to see you."

"Okaaaay," said Leah. "Well, can't they see our headlights?"

"Yes," replied Kate. "But if they see you looking at a map, they'll know they've been made."

Leah pulled Thom's coat over her head and took in his scent. A wild thrill rippled through her heart that she hadn't expected. She closed her eyes for a second and centered herself, then turned on the flashlight.

"Take a look at the roads around us," her father's muffled voice said. "Is there any easy way to get around this intersection?"

"Hang on..." she muttered, squinting at the map. "I have to figure out where we are first..."

"We just crossed 120. We're on 13, just south of the Indiana Toll Road."

"So that little town we went through was...Middlebury?" Leah asked.

"Yup. I think so," replied her father.

"Okay, I got it." Leah traced the road with her finger. "It looks like there's a side road coming up...but..."

"But what?" asked Kate.

Leah clicked the light off and pulled Thom's coat off her head. "It's nothing but back roads," she reported, handing the coat back to Kate. "It's gonna take us at least 10 to 15 miles out of the way, and with all the winding roads, we're going to use a good amount of gas to get around these guys. I don't know..."

"Well, we've got about a quarter tank of gas left," said Jay. "So if we waste a couple hours, how much gas are we going to use, and is it worth just going forward and seeing what happens?"

"Absolutely not," Kate said with finality. "I know from what you guys told me you've been through a lot, but you guys have no idea what it's like out in the real world. I've seen some crazy shit since I left California, and now that we're all reunited, I don't think we should do anything to purposely put ourselves in danger. This," she said jabbing a finger at the windshield, "is a recipe for disaster. They could have several cars lined up on either side of the road, guys with guns...we can all get killed if we get too much closer."

"So like, what we do, man?" asked Hunter. "I have to say, I'm kind of okay with going around. What we saw back on campus was mondo crazy."

Jay sighed. "All right, we'll take a vote. I'm not exactly sure what we'll face up there, but I don't know if it's worth wasting gas and time to go around."

"I say we avoid this at all costs," Kate said.

"I agree with Kate," Thom said. "The last thing we need to do is get into another fight."

Leah's chest tightened. He'd sacrificed his body to protect hers. When Brett and his thugs decided to take the food that she and Thom brought from the dining hall the day after the CME hit, Thom stood up to the three upperclassman and had taken a beating for it. When the rest of the students in the dorm wanted to cower or run away, Thom stood with her and had helped defend the building against the looters. She wanted to turn and look back at him, but knew she

wouldn't see anything in the darkness.

What kind of gratitude would that be if I didn't stand with you now? But...none of these roads offer a straight path north...

"If we just turn off the road right here, the gas that we use trying to go around them might get us further down the road...what if that ends up being the deciding factor on whether or not we make it to Mac's place?" asked Leah.

"If we go forward too much further, we might not have a choice in the matter," warned Kate.

"Hey guys, check that out!" blurted Hunter. He pushed his way up past Thom so his head appeared next to Kate's. "I see more lights."

"I see them, too. Looks like they're on both sides of the road," Jay muttered.

"I don't like this..." Kate added.

"Dad, did you see that car we just passed?"

"I saw something in the headlights—was anyone in it?"

Leah shivered. "It was—it was up on the side of the road; there were a lot of bullet holes in it."

"Well, that's definitely no bueno," muttered Hunter as he disappeared again.

"I'm telling you, this is a bad idea," Kate intoned. "We need to turn around, find a side road, and get the hell out of here."

"Are we even sure that they're blocking the road, though?" Jay asked.

"There's another car on the left—" Thom added.

"Looks like it's all burnt up," Leah observed.

"This is so not cool..." Hunter moaned from the backseat.

Leah strained to see just a little further down the road. "Dad, there's several more cars on my side. It looks like they've all been parked there on purpose—they're all lined up all nice and neat."

"You see anybody in them?" asked Kate.

"No," Leah muttered. "Everything looks empty. But I see..."

"Are those bullet holes?" asked Hunter from the back.

"I think you're right," Leah said. "A lot of these cars have been shot."

"Jay..." Kate began.

"Look, the next turnoff is still a little ways down the road," Jay offered. "We're not quite to this roadblock yet, let's just keep going and see what's there. Maybe we'll get lucky, and there won't be anything across the road and we can just drive on past. Maybe they're just people that are trying to defend their town or something?"

"Maybe they're waiting to ambush anybody that drives under the Toll Road?" asked Kate with more than a little venom in her voice.

Leah grimaced. "Come on, guys, don't fight..."

A gentle hand rested on Leah's shoulder. "We're not fighting, honey. It's just...we're both nervous and scared, and nobody really knows what we should do."

"Well, like you guys said, we have two choices: keep going straight and hope for the best," Hunter said, "or turn and use up gas, hoping that the side road we take isn't blocked, too."

Jay cursed in Hindi, something Leah had only heard once or twice in her life. "This is a catch 22..."

"Maybe," Kate said slowly. "I'm willing to bet that if these people have pooled their resources enough to block this road then they won't have enough guns, people, or cars to block all the side roads as well. I mean look at us...we're pretty well off," Kate said. "And we barely have enough food and fuel to keep going."

"Yeah," Thom said, "but if they've been capturing anybody who drives by, they could be sitting on a pretty nice supply of food, water, gas—whatever..."

Leah grabbed the door handle with a clammy hand. Despite the chill in the air, uncertainty gripped her heart and squeezed.

"We can't just keep going," Thom muttered. "It's too risky. I'd rather waste the gas and time—and stay safe—then run into a bunch of guys with guns who want to take everything we've got."

Something stirred inside Leah's belly when Thom said 'take everything.' She remembered again how he'd stepped up and defended her against Brett and the fraternity brothers. He hadn't backed down from the fight, and hadn't even hesitated to put himself in harm's way. Leah knew she could trust him—she did trust him—but...

It made sense, but Leah worried about their fuel. If they could just roll forward, maybe wave at somebody or even spend a few minutes talking, and then continue on their way without burning up gallons of fuel...

"No matter which way we go, it's a bad choice," Kate said. "But I see no point in throwing ourselves into a potentially dangerous and maybe fatal situation. What's the worst thing that will happen if we go around, and end up running out of gas some point to the north?"

"We walk," Jay said flatly.

"Right. And what happens if we get a flat tire—or two—before we run out of gas?"

"We walk," Leah muttered, seeing where Kate was going.

"So what's the worst case scenario for each choice?" Kate asked. "If we go around and we run out of gas, we have to walk that much sooner. If we go straight and there's a roadblock and guys with guns, we could all end up dead."

"Yeah, that sounds pretty bad," Hunter mumbled.

"I'm with Kate," Thom announced. "We have to go around. There's no real choice. We've got to stay safe."

Leah smiled in the darkness. *He still wants to protect me.* Leah had her decision. She cleared her throat, then spoke.

"I agree with Thom and Kate. Dad, I think it's just too dangerous to go forward."

"And what do you say, Hunter?" asked Jay.

"I don't know, man...I want to get there fast and all, but I also want to get there like, alive. This Mac you guys keep talkin' about sounds pretty cool...I say we go around."

"You're not worried about having to walk if we run out of gas? We could be looking at a couple hundred miles..."

"I'm cool with that," Hunter muttered. "I'd rather walk than dodge bullets any day, man."

Jay sighed. "Okay, it's settled then. We'll go around."

"Here comes the turnoff," Leah said, pointing out the windshield. "Do you see it up there? County Road 4. There's a little reflective marker by the road on your left."

"Yeah...okay, there it is," muttered Jay.

"Lights, I see more lights!" Thom blurted.

"Yeah, I see them too," Leah said. "On either side of the road—there's the roadblock!"

Jay slowed enough for them to make the turn without flipping, and the wheels changed pitch as they went from the smooth blacktop of the highway to the rougher county road.

"Whoa, there's five or six more lights turning on. There's a lot of dudes back there!" Hunter reported from back.

"Keep an eye on them, Hunter," Kate said, still between the front seats.

"Roger dodger!"

"Well," sighed Jay as he settled into the new route. "Looks like you convinced us all to make the right choice."

Kate leaned over and kissed Jay on the cheek. "I got lucky...it could've easily been nothing, but I figured my luck had to change at some point."

"What do you mean your luck had to change?" asked Leah. "You managed to land your plane after the CME, escape kidnappers, drive, walk, and ride halfway across the country...you're still alive, Kate, and you found us. How was all that not lucky?"

"Because I didn't get here soon enough, and I was kidnapped—twice—"

"Guys?" interjected Hunter.

"What's up?" asked Thom.

"I just saw some dude back there at the intersection...he was

holding something up to his face that looked like a radio, and I think he had like, binoculars or something. Somebody turned and shined the light on him for a second so I didn't see much, but I think they know which way we went, for sure."

"Well, *shit*," said Jay.

Leah didn't know which made her feel more cold, the air outside that constantly seeped into the car, or the fact they were being watched. They had indeed dodged a big bullet by avoiding the roadblock, but she wondered if that might cause more problems down the road.

CHAPTER 2

FIRST SERGEANT J.T. MCKINNON, US Army (ret.) paused next to a dormant oak to catch his breath. He stood on the crest of a deep ravine, one of the several dozen surrounding his bug-out retreat, deep in the woods of northern Michigan. The land in general sloped gently away from where he stood, rolling over and through deep ravines before flattening out at his lake. A decent amount of snow covered the ground, muffling his footsteps but also leaving a clear trail of tracks to where he'd been. Thus far, he'd been able to take a path through the bushes and downed leaves from last fall to avoid leaving too much of a trail, but he was reaching the extent of his morning patrol and was ready to find a new path back to his compound.

As he turned, movement among the trees downslope caught his attention. He pulled himself behind the oak's trunk and squatted, wincing at the crack-snap of his knees.

What do we have here?

Mac peeled just enough of his head around the tree to get a clear view. A man wearing blaze-orange camo emerged from behind a tree. He staggered then dropped to his knees, using a fancy rifle to catch himself from falling face first into the snow. A second man appeared behind the first, bent over, and helped his partner stand. The two stood there for a second, leaning on each other, then the first pointed east, parallel to the lake's shoreline, and they plodded forward through ankle-deep snow.

Mac frowned. *Well, I always knew this day would come...*

He slipped his lever-action Henry from his shoulder and cinched the straps on his leather day pack. Mac waited for the two men to disappear into a ravine, then stalked parallel to their path. He knew the trail they walked would lead them to a particular spot, and he made sure to be there before his uninvited guests arrived. Being further up the hill, Mac was able to outdistance them and remain hidden behind the crest of the ravine.

He slid the last ten feet down the side of the ravine, got up cussing, and brushed the snow off his pants. Mac took a quick scan of the area and found two walnut trees practically kissing, the union of their trunks providing an adequately concealed position. He listened for a second, hearing only the usual sounds of the breeze in the treetops and a few birds chirping. Mac grinned and made his way to the walnut trees.

In less than a minute, he heard heavy breathing—and heavier footsteps—as the two hunters stomped through the snow, muttering and panting on their cold trek through the snowbound forest.

Mac waited until they were well within talking distance, then stepped around his walnut barricade, cycled the Henry's lever with a loud click-clack, and took aim on the lead hunter.

"That's far enough, gentlemen," he announced. "Hands in the air where I can see them, if you don't mind."

Both men stared at Mac as if he'd been a ghost. The first dropped his rifle, fell to his knees, and threw his hands in the air. "Thank God! Don't shoot! You're the first person we've seen in—"

"Shut the hell up!" Mac snapped. "You," he said, shifting his rifle to aim at the standing man. "Drop that boom stick before I drop you."

The second man reacted as if he'd been slapped in the face. He let his shotgun fall to the snow without a word, fell to his knees, and raised his hands.

"Both of you, link your fingers behind your heads, if you please," Max said shifting his rifle back to the first man.

"Look, mister, we don't mean any trouble. Can you help us out?"

"What are you two doing up here?" Mac growled.

"Hunting!" said the first man.

"Well, not right now—we were hunting—" blurted the second.

"That's right, now we're just trying to get home. When the northern lights hit—"

"That was some crazy shit," said the first to the second.

"We don't know what the hell was going on, but we packed up and decided to head home. Only, we ran out of gas and had to ditch the car," the second man said.

The first man nodded his head enthusiastically. "Yeah, we've been walking for like, three days...none of the gas stations had power, so we couldn't get gas...nobody would sell us any food, and then we couldn't find anybody to help even if we wanted to!"

"Where the hell is everyone?" asked his partner.

Mac lowered the rifle from his shoulder, but kept it aimed at the men from his hip. "Things have gotten real bad out there, gentlemen," he said. "I don't mean to come off as rude, but you're on private property, and these are bad times. Most folks who haven't made it to the FEMA camps are probably well on their way to starvation."

"What the hell is going on?" asked the first man.

"FEMA camps! Did we get nuked?" asked the second.

"No," sighed Mac. "We were hit with a solar flare."

"What does that mean?" asked the first man. "Was that the northern lights we saw?"

Mac explained. The first man sank from his knees until his butt

rested on his feet. His hands came away from the back of his head and his shoulders slumped. He stared at the ground in front of him. "Oh my God."

The second hunter, seeing that Mac didn't shoot his partner for moving, also relaxed. He stared at the back of his partner's head. "What about Mary and the kids?" He turned feverish eyes on Mac. "I have to get home! My wife and kids are there alone!"

"How the hell are we gonna do that without gas in the car?" said the first man, staring at his partner. "We're doomed...this is the end, man."

"Well look, I don't feel it would be too neighborly of me to just turn you two out into the cold..." Mac muttered. He shouldered his rifle and stood staring at the two, half-starved, exhausted hunters.

"I don't suppose you're too much of a threat at the moment. Here..." he said, removing his backpack. "I've got some rations in here that I always keep on me. Why don't you guys take these." Mac opened his pack and handed the first hunter an emergency lifeboat ration. It was hard as a brick and vacuum sealed, but once opened, would taste like a coconut flavored cookie and provided needed calories and fat.

"If you keep walking that direction," he said pointing with his other hand, "you'll come across the main road in about three miles. From there, you got about a five-mile hike until you reach Nord. Most of the folk up here won't think too much about losing power. Someone in town should be able to help you out."

Whatever the hell you do, don't go the other direction. I can't let you assholes find my compound.

"You boys look hungry. Here." Mac offered a Datrex lifeboat ration to the first hunter.

"Oh thank God! Thank you!" the man said, eagerly accepting Mac's handout. He held the survival ration in trembling, gloved hands and nodded his thanks again.

Mac got a good look at the man up close. He sported a week-old, scraggly beard, dark circles under his eyes, minor cuts on his face and neck.

You look like shit that's been twice through a goose.

The second hunter struggled to his feet, helped up by his partner. He accepted another pack of food from Mac without a word, turning the vacuum-sealed brick of survival biscuits over and reading the label on the back.

"This is some fancy food for somebody lost out in the woods..."

Mac stared at the man. "I never said I was lost."

"If you're not lost, then...there's something more to you than meets the eye, mister."

Dammit.

Mac didn't like the tone in the man's voice. "I don't know where you're going with this, friend, but I suggest you clear on out of here. I don't think I like your attitude."

"The way I see it," the man said, glancing at his partner, "no way an old man would be walking around out here in the woods carrying a nice fancy rifle like that and survival rations like this..."

"How do you know I'm alone?" Mac asked.

"Because you're an old man," the hunter smirked. "Anybody who cared for you wouldn't let you come down here and approach two young men in the prime of their lives, all by yourself."

The first hunter blinked, looking at the food and back at his friend. "What the hell are you *doing*?"

"Shut up, Marty." The second hunter never took his eyes off Mac. "I don't have kids and a wife to get back to, but I do want to get back to my life. And you," he said pointing a gloved finger at Mac, "are my ticket back to civilization. So where's your house, huh? You got a snowmobile or something?" The man took a step forward.

Mac held his ground. "Don't do this."

The first man laughed. "Or what? You gonna hit me with your cane?" He looked Mac up and down. "I got 30 years on you, old man."

Mac's hand itched to slip the rifle from his shoulder. *I should've never put that long gun up. You're slipping, old man.*

"Carlton," warned Marty.

"Yeah," continued Carlton, emboldened by Mac's hesitation. "I can see it in your eyes. There's no way you can pull that gun off your shoulder and shoot me, is there? We're too close now." He took another step, his boot crunching in the snow.

"I'm warning you," Mac's said. "I'm not the kind of person you want to threaten."

Carlton laughed. "The world is ending, if what you're telling us is true. If that's the case, then I don't give a *fuck* who I threaten." He smiled, his teeth stained and yellow. "I mean to survive, and I'm gonna do that however the hell I can. The rule of law is gone."

Mac waited. He knew what came next. Carlton's body language—hunched forward, muscles tense, eyes wide and staring, nose flaring—telegraphed his next move. As soon as his knees bent, Mac leapt into action.

Carlton lunged at Mac, dropping the food ration. Mac casually shifted his hips, swinging the butt of his rifle up and catching the hunter in the throat. He jabbed forward, and Carlton staggered back, coughing while Marty shouted for everyone to calm down.

That was the opening Mac needed.

The old soldier took a half step back and reversed the spin on his

rifle, bringing the barrel to bear on Carlton. Without hesitation, he pulled the trigger and the old Henry belched thunder and fire. The noise shattered the stillness of the morning and Carlton crumpled to the ground on his back. As Marty screamed, Carlton tore open his jacket and pulled out a pistol with a shaking hand.

Mac didn't give him the chance to shoot. He cycled the lever, ejecting one brass casing and put another round in the man's chest.

Click-clack. Mac chambered another round and swung the rifle to aim at Marty.

"Don't shoot! For God's sake, don't shoot!"

Mac nodded at Carlton's twitching body. "Your friend there made the wrong decision. I hope you prove to be smarter."

"Look, mister, I just want to get home to my wife and kids. I swear to God, I don't want any trouble! Here, take my rifle—take his rifle, too—I don't give a shit! I just want to find my wife and kids!" the man pleaded, his eyes filling with tears.

Mac sighed, but kept the rifle aimed at the intruder. "Fine. Pick up your rifle, grab your buddy's food pack there, and get the hell out of here. I told you which way to go...can you remember how to get to Nord?"

The man nodded, wiping his face. He knelt and grabbed the discarded food pack and his rifle. Standing again, he nodded as he shuffled past Mac, keeping a wary eye on the old sergeant.

"Thank you—thank you, sir! I promise, I won't cause any trouble!"

Mac kept his aim on Marty's back. "You make sure you never come back here, you hear?" Mac called. "I see your face again, and you'll end up like your friend!"

The hunter said something over his shoulder and disappeared on the far side of the ravine, heading in the correct direction.

Frowning at how his hands shook with the receding adrenaline rush, Mac lowered his rifle and stared at the dead man on the ground, tendrils of steam raising into the air from the entry holes.

Dammit, now I have to figure out how to bury your ass.

He followed the footsteps of the retreating hunter with his eyes. "So much for opsec."

CHAPTER 3

JAY WINCED AS HE turned the steering wheel and pulled the car around yet another curve in the road. Since taking their emergency turn-off and bypassing the roadblock, Jay found it increasingly difficult to stay behind the wheel. The road was a curling ribbon of asphalt snaking through the woods and fields of northern Indiana, and the constant shifting of his hands on the steering wheel quickly became more than he could bear. The fire that burned in the palms of his hands had been merely a dull ache in the previous days. Now?

He refused to think about infection. That would open the door to a worry he didn't have time to handle at the moment. Jay had to focus on getting everyone safely to Mac's compound. He couldn't take time to worry about himself—there was nothing anyone could do, anyway. They had no antibiotics or medicine of any kind other than a few travel packs of ibuprofen. They barely had enough water to wash down those pills, had he chosen to take them.

No, the only thing Jay could do was suck it up and deal with the pain. So he tried driving with one hand while letting the other rest in his lap. That took only a few minutes for him to realize he was constantly shifting his hands back and forth from the steering wheel. He found it harder and harder to grip with any kind of strength.

The sun had fully risen an hour ago, so hiding his condition was no longer possible. Leah sat in the front seat, her head resting against the glass as she slept. Normally, he would've insisted Kate sit next to him so Leah could stretch out in the back, but his daughter had stayed up all night to be his navigator and he didn't have the heart to wake her just to move to the backseat.

Jay's eyes flicked to the rearview mirror. Not that Thom wouldn't enjoy having Leah lay against him while she slept.

He focused back on the road before them. The highway, littered with abandoned cars that had run dry, had been in stark contrast to the back roads they now found themselves on. As peaceful as the scenery looked, with the snow-custed fields and barren trees lining the highway, and settlements stretching out in either direction, the complete lack of cars made it seem like any normal Christmas out in the country.

Jay imagined families clustered by fireplaces or hanging out in kitchens with freshly baked bread and it warmed his heart to think that maybe, some of the smaller farming communities might actually

be somewhat normal, despite the lack of electricity.

A grin creased Jay's face. *I bet the Amish don't even notice anything's wrong.*

That was an idea. He added 'find Amish friends' to the top of his list of things to do.

Jay shook his head and blinked away the fatigue that threatened to close his eyes. *Good Lord, I'm either more tired than I thought or I'm starting to hallucinate. Finding the Amish?* Jay grunted. *And how the hell am I going to do that? Don't they live in Pennsylvania?*

"Jay!" Kate snapped.

"What?"

"That was the road we needed to take," Kate said. "Didn't you hear me?"

Jay cursed under his breath. He slowed the big Tahoe to a stop, then made a three-point turn, wincing as he was forced to grip the steering wheel and pull it all the way around, then all the way back.

"What's going on?" Leah said groggily.

"Nothing, *priya*," Jay muttered. "I just made a mistake, that's all. Missed the turn."

"Mistake?" Kate asked. "Jay, I think it's time we switched drivers. I asked you like, five times if you knew that was the road and you didn't say anything."

Jay put the vehicle in park after checking the road to make sure they were truly alone. He glanced down at his hands and cringed. Fresh blood seeped through the filthy bandages.

Dammit. "Okay...yeah, I guess I could use some rest."

"I should say so," said Kate. "You've only been going for what, two days straight? Then you rescued me, shot a man, and drove us out of Bloomington. Let me take over for a while, honey."

"Sounds good," Jay said as he opened the driver door.

He stood outside the vehicle for a moment and took in a deep breath of cold air, watching the landscape. *At least this way I don't have to tell anyone about my hands.*

Jay sat in the back of the Tahoe and consoled himself with the precious books they'd managed to bring from the library. As Kate got them back on the road, Leah asked questions about Hunter's family while Thom watched from the front seat, looking for further trouble.

Jay let the rhythm of the tires over the road lull him into a sleepy mood. There was no way for him to stretch out—the car was too filled with bodies and supplies—so he tucked himself into the seat behind the driver and opened the agriculture book.

Dammit. I can't drive, and I can barely hold this book. He took another glance at his bandages when he was sure Leah and Hunter were occupied.

“Yeah, my little sister is like, a complete pain in the ass sometimes...but I’m really worried about her.”

“Where does your family live?” asked Leah.

Jay tried to block out the pain in his hands as he thumbed through the table of contents looking for a good topic to take his mind off things.

“Well, my mom and dad split up a couple years ago. He lives... well...he’s like, a lobbyist or something so he lives in Washington, D.C., you know?”

Leah was quiet for a moment.

“Yeah, I’m thinking it’s not exactly the best place for somebody to be like, shacking up, right?”

“Well, if any place is going to have resources and soldiers or somebody to keep the peace, it’s going to be the capital. I think he’s probably better off than us,” Kate added from the front seat.

At least he’ll have access to a doctor. Jay glanced at his hands again. A trickle of sweat dribbled down his cheek. *No, nonononono. I’m not getting a fever...*

Jay focused on the book, blocking out the conversation around him. He desperately needed something to take his mind off of his physical ailments.

Fire-starting techniques. Good enough!

He turned the page and continued reading about materials he could use as tinder. It seemed so academic—he wished he’d taken Kate up on her many offers to go camping in the past.

I should’ve learned this stuff years ago...

He glanced up, lost in thought, and found Kate watching him in the rearview mirror again. He offered a smile and looked back down at the book in his lap.

“You doing okay back there?”

Jay looked up again. “Huh? Oh...yeah. Yeah, I’m okay.”

He watched Kate’s eyes in the rearview mirror. She squinted at him, giving him a familiar look that all wives seem to deploy when dealing with recalcitrant husbands.

She knows something. Jay looked down at the book.

He got the basics—you put down your tinder, stacked your fuel in such a way so that it burns easy, and make sure you leave an open channel for air to fuel the fire. He just wasn’t sure about how exactly to stack the wood.

According to the book, if the homesteader in question didn’t stack his fire properly, he risked the flame going out before it really got started. If he stacked it too tightly, the flame wouldn’t have enough air to burn and would go out almost as quick. However, he didn’t see any explanation as to how exactly to stack that wood, the author

instead choosing to mention something about trial and error.

Jay looked out the window at the passing countryside. The trees, bare under the early afternoon winter sun, mocked him. *I don't have time for trial and error. I should've learned this shit back before everything went crazy. If the car breaks down, we could freeze to death without fire.*

Jay frowned. *I can't drive, I can't hold a shotgun, I'm not going to be any good in a fight. I've got to be able to do something to support the group.*

The pressure of responsibility tinged with guilt weighed heavily on his shoulders. Jay settled back into his seat and sighed. *I don't have any time to practice.* His stomach rumbled, giving him the perfect distraction.

"Anybody else getting hungry?"

Four pairs of eyes turned on him. He swallowed. "Okay, stupid question. Got it....but what do you say we stop for a bathroom break and a bite to eat?"

Kate was silent for a moment, studying the gauges on the dashboard. "We may as well—until we find a place to get a little more fuel, I don't want to stop, but I gotta admit I could really use a chance to go to the bathroom."

"Me too," Leah added quickly.

"I don't know about you guys, but I just want to get out and stretch," Thom added.

"Jay, what's wrong?" Kate asked, cutting right through his distraction.

Shit.

He cleared his throat. "You mean besides the fact that our house has burned down, and the world is ending?"

Kate laughed. "Yes. Besides that." Those soft brown eyes, the same ones that pulled him across the room and out of his teenage angst to talk to her so many years ago in high school, drilled into him now, seeking—demanding—the truth.

Jay sighed. "I..."

"What is it, Dad?"

Jay gave up in the face of a two-front assault and confessed. "I think my hand is infected."

"What?" gasped Leah. "Let me see!"

"Don't!" he cried, pulling his hand away. "It really hurts, and it started bleeding again while I was driving."

"Dammit, Jay, why didn't you say something?" Kate blurted out.

He looked at Kate in the mirror again. "Because I'd just found you, we escaped, and I didn't want to ruin everyone's mood...like this."

"But—"

Jay looked at his daughter. "*Priya*, there's nothing we can do, so

what difference does it make? Do you have any antibiotics other than that Neosporin in the first aid kit we got from Mac's place?"

"Dad..."

"We'll figure something out. The important thing is now we know," said Kate from the driver's seat.

"And knowing is half the battle..." Hunter cried from the back. "G.I. Joooooe!"

"Cobra!" Thom hissed.

Jay could tell by the set of her shoulders Kate was pissed despite the laughter that echoed through the car. She was set on her course of action. If he learned one thing about his wife in their time together, when Kate Cantrell sets her mind to something, it will happen or she will move mountains to make it so.

He gave in and let Leah gently unwrap the bandage on his right hand. She gasped.

"Dude, that reeks!" muttered Hunter.

"Oh, come on, it's not that bad," Thom countered. "It's really not, Mr. C., we might be able—"

"Thom, call me Jay. Again."

"Okay..." he swallowed. "Jay."

Jay looked out the window and smiled at his daughter's would-be suitor's awkwardness. The kid handled himself admirably so far, being separated from his family, losing all of his belongings, thrown together with a bunch of strangers—yet he still looked out for Jay's daughter.

He winced as Leah probed the inflamed, angry red gash on his palm. *What happens next? Will I get blood poisoning or something? Is this how I'm going to die?* He turned, tears welling up in his eyes, as he looked at his daughter, hunched over his hand, tracing the outline of the redness with one gentle fingertip.

Will I never see you marry and have children of your own? Will this be the last time we spend together, priya?

His eyes shifted to find Kate's in the mirror. Hers were as moist as his felt. His vision blurred around the edges. *And you, my beloved. You went through so much to get back to me...and this is how it ends? Killed by something we can't even see or fight?*

Kate looked away. "Thom," she said, her voice made of iron. "Get the map."

"Uh, why?" asked the young man in the passenger seat. He unfolded the rustling paper map and spread it out on his lap.

"We're going back to the highway—find a way across these fields or I'll make my own road."

"But—" Thom began.

"No buts, we need to get Jay to Mac's place as soon as possible. If

anyone can help him, it's Mac."

"Kate, no," Jay tried to argue from the backseat. "Ow!" he complained when Leah pressed on a sore spot.

"Sorry!"

"I'm not going to argue with you," his wife replied. "We need to get to Mac's place as fast as possible and we're not going to do that on these back roads."

"But those guys at the roadblock," began Hunter. "What if there's more...?"

"They'll just have to stay the hell out of my way," retorted Kate.

Jay smiled. *God, I love this woman.*

CHAPTER 4

MAC STOOD ON THE cliff's edge and looked over the precipice down to the lake. It barely rated as a cliff. Some 30 feet high, he'd seen campers jump off these very rocks in the summer, splashing down into the lake below with hoots and hollers. But now it served as a useful deterrent.

He turned and surveyed the area. At the top of a small hill on the northern edge of the island he could just see his neighbor's house. Cedar Vance was a recluse and the only other person living in this neck of the woods. If Mac moved some of the bushes just so, he could make out the beige corner of Vance's log cabin house about a quarter mile away across the lake.

He turned in a slow circle, examining the clearing at the top of the hill. Several large boulders, deposited during the last Ice Age, graced the southern and western edge of the crest of the hill. With the cliff face to the north, the only easy approach to this site was the way he'd come, from the east, in a direct line toward his own compound hidden in the steep, rocky hills on the other side of the lake.

Mac nodded to himself. This would do just fine as a last resort bug-out location. The only thing he had to do now was improve the place a little and add some structure. He filed that thought away on his mental checklist for when Jay and Kate and the kids arrived. He'd have plenty of hands to help dig cold storage pits and haul timber up to make shelters.

The island, never officially named on any maps, was heavily timbered with steep, rocky shores and several central hills. The one he stood upon claimed the northernmost corner of the island. It was about as inhospitable and primeval as any of the woods of northern Michigan. In short, it would make an excellent last-ditch place to escape to, should the need arise to evacuate his main compound.

Mac hated the idea of abandoning the place that he'd built with his own hands. Over the course of a lifetime, he and his wife had converted their vacation house into a bug-out retreat. It served well as such while he was in the Army, but now that he was going to live here full time, he needed a new bug out location—J.T. MacKinnon was a man who prided himself on having backups. And backups for his backups.

When the solar storm knocked out the power grid, Mac didn't panic. He'd been preparing for disasters his entire life—he loaded up

his truck and drove up here. His retreat was just the way he'd left it back in the summer: fully stocked, clean, and ready to go.

Standing in a patch of pale sunlight, Mac pulled out a notebook and made a rough sketch of the lay of the land, including the cliff face, the boulders, the trees, and the easiest approach. He wanted to make sure Jay and Kate and the others could find this place and he always planned things better when he held a piece of paper in his hand and doodled.

A passing cloud blotted out the sun for a few seconds, reminding him that it would take almost an hour to get back to his house. Before long, the sun would find its way down to the horizon and shroud the land in a long winter's night again.

Mac finished his drawing, made a note of the direction of Vance's house, then closed the notebook and slipped it in his pack. Standing up from the warm rock he'd been sitting on, he stretched his joints and groaned in relief.

He was 67 years old. He'd managed to stave off arthritis during his active life, but the last couple years had given him a wake-up call into the joys of old age. Winter was never his favorite—it meant long hours immobile inside during the coldest part of the year, hopefully by a nice, warm fire. As long as he could keep his joints moving and warm—even if it meant sitting in a rocking chair by the fire and reading a book—Mac found he could get up without much trouble.

He hefted his pack and slipped it over his shoulders, then picked up his walking staff. Mac adjusted the fitting on his backpack, then paused. The sound of an outboard motor echoed across the water behind him. He turned for one final look at Vance's place.

Dissipating wakes in the calm lake leading from Vance's place to the north side of the island announced the telltale presence of someone's boat.

Shit. Mac turned and tromped through the snow out of the clearing and began his descent to the shore. The last thing he wanted was company out here as he was trying to plan his private retreat.

By the time Mac slipped and clambered down the hill to the rocky shore, Vance had secured his 12' Zodiac on the beach next to Mac's smaller inflatable.

"Howdy, neighbor!" Mac called out in false enthusiasm at seeing the only other person within five miles.

"First sergeant," Vance replied with a slow nod.

Mac stopped near a large boulder a few feet away from the water and leaned against it while he caught his breath. "Don't ever get old."

Vance, always a serious man, cracked a slight grin. His spare frame belied a certain strength as he adjusted the rifle slung over his shoulder. One of the things Mac always liked about his reclusive

neighbor was the fact the man never went anywhere without a weapon—that showed a certain sense of duty that appealed to the old soldier.

“Glad I found you out there, MacKinnon,” the younger man said around a wad of tobacco in his mouth.

Well, that makes one of us. Out loud, Mac said, “Oh?”

Vance nodded again, the sharp, angular features of his face thrown into even more shadow as he moved his head. He scratched at the jet black beard on his chin and narrowed his gray eyes.

“Mostly just happy to see you made it up here.” He turned and spat a glob of tobacco juice into the water with a splash. “World’s goin’ crazy out there.”

Mac grunted and shifted his weight against the rock. He’d known Vance for a dozen years—as the only two property owners up here for a few miles, it made sense for them to at least have a professional relationship. Neither man had what anyone would call an outgoing personality, but they respected each other. That was enough for them.

Vance shifted the wad under his lower lip for a moment, then squinted at Mac. “Any idea how bad it is? I hear some things, but mostly just local. Long-distance contact is fading.”

Mac crossed his arms. “It’s about the same for me. I haven’t heard much beyond some random calls for help since I moved up here full time. Before I left though, plenty. Lot of shit going down near Detroit.”

Vance’s eyes brightened for a moment—he really was starved for information. “When isn’t there? Watchya hear?” *Spit.*

Mac ignored his neighbor’s vile habit and continued, “At the local level, I imagine things pretty much everywhere are about where they’re at up here. Those who prepared are better off than those who didn’t. Folks in the cities are suffering and everyone else is just hunkering down.” He shrugged. “Nationally? It’s anyone’s guess. I’d heard some folks talking about FEMA camps around the bigger cities, but then that dropped off.”

“You think they’re shuttin’ down the airwaves or...?”

Mac stared out over the calm water of the lake for a moment. “I don’t know. We just don’t know. Could be the government decided to use this crisis as a reason to make a lot of tinfoil hat conspiracies come true.” He shrugged one shoulder. “Could be the government got caught flat-footed like the rest of us and they’re just now getting things moving. Could be people are just running out of gas to power their gennys and can’t broadcast anymore. It’s been almost two weeks now...”

Vance nodded again. He too looked out over the water. The sun was close to setting now, and the shadows deepened into a sullen

purple along the far northern shoreline. He turned and looked up the steep, snow-covered hill toward the rocky crest.

"You know, this island would make one helluva redoubt."

Mac viewed his neighbor askance. "If need be, I suppose," he admitted. *God dammit.*

"If need be," Vance repeated, still squinting upslope. "I ain't one to beat around the bush, MacKinnon," he said, turning those slate gray eyes on Mac. "I think we need to have an accord here, you and I."

"An accord?" Mac asked. "I'm listening."

"You're ex-Army, I'm..." He turned away. "Something else." Looking back at Mac, Vance continued, "But we both share the same mindset, I think. I've kept watch over your place—" He raised a hand to forestall Mac's outburst. "Relax, I do it from a distance with my thermal gear. That's how I knew you were up there," he said, jerking a thumb toward the crest.

"I'm not sure how to take the fact you've been spying on me."

"As a compliment," Vance replied. "I look out for number one, MacKinnon, but I can respect a fellow survivor. I don't waste my time on those who don't respect their own. Don't know why you stayed down south as long as you did among the sheep, but glad you made it up here."

Mac looked down at the smooth pebbles lining the rocky shore. "Honestly, it was my neighbor. I stayed to help him out. His girl was in college—Indiana—and his wife was out over the Pacific when it all hit."

"Damn." *Spit.*

Mac grunted. "Indeed. I couldn't leave until he was squared away and on the road to get his girl. She's like the granddaughter I never had."

Vance cleared his throat. "My point is, I think we can help each other out as this mess goes forward."

Mac eyed his neighbor. "What exactly are you proposing?"

"Nothing formal. You get into a bind, you call me, I help. Likewise if I need help."

Mac nodded. "A mutual assistance group."

"Exactly."

Mac thought it over for a moment. Vance clearly had some skills and gear—not every weekend warrior out there had thermal scopes and gear like the black beauty of an AR hanging from Vance's shoulder.

"Sounds intriguing," Mac admitted, "but what makes you think an old man like me can offer you much assistance?"

"Not many old men I know can take this hill like you just did, carrying a pack and rifle."

Mac laughed. "Got me there. So, what exactly can you offer me, then?"

"Support and aid from myself and the Grover County Militia, if need be." He stared at Mac, as if waiting for the older man to laugh or challenge him on his association with a known militia group.

Mac looked back down at the rocks, mulling this new development over. Michigan and militia groups had gone hand in hand for decades, but Mac had thus far never run into one of the paramilitary groups personally. As a former soldier, the mere mention of the word militia tended to get his hackles up. In the press, militias had almost always been portrayed as crazy men in the woods plotting the overthrow of the government or mass murder of liberals, foreigners, or some such nonsense.

He'd seen enough of the media's tactics over the years to understand that they vilified and reviled that which they couldn't accept or agree with, so he didn't put too much faith in what mainstream America thought of militia groups. Like most things people do in groups, there were bound to be some bad apples. He just didn't know enough about the Grover County Militia to make a judgment call one way or another.

"I'm sorry, Cedar, but I just don't know. I've heard about the militia before but..."

"We ain't like the others."

Mac looked at Vance. "How so?"

Vance sighed. "Your hesitation is understandable." He worked the wad under his lip again. "I just want you to know the Grover County Militia is not what we're portrayed as in the media."

Mac nodded. "I trust the media about as far as I can spit. I'm not worried you're with a militia," he said diplomatically. "Fact of the matter is, I don't know enough about your group to feel comfortable being associated with them." Mac raised a hand.

"Now, I'm not saying I think you all are bunch of antigovernment wackos—you may be for all I know, but that doesn't matter to me. As you said, I look out for number one. I need a chance to vet your group before I decide it's worth risking my neck for them. You, on the other hand, are another matter," Mac said.

"Appreciate that," Vance said. *Spit.*

Mac nodded and scratched at the gray stubble on his chin. "We're neighbors, and in this situation, I have a feeling neighbors are going to have to rely on each other, whether they want to or not."

"You don't know how happy I am to hear you say that," Vance said, a smile on his face.

Mac looked at him askance. "I'm not exactly sure I follow you. I just flat-out told you I don't trust your group and you're happy to hear

it?"

Vance nodded. He spat on the rocks. "If you'd agreed to join us and help out right away, I would've been suspicious from the get-go. This day and age, anybody who wants to join is usually looking for a free handout. We have supplies, but they're not just for handing out to anyone who wants them. We keep them for the people who actually need them. The fact that you don't trust me enough to join forces with the militia outright shows me you've got enough common sense to be careful of who you do trust. That is the first rule for anyone associated with us."

It was Mac's turn to grin. "Well then, I'm beginning to like your group a little more already."

Vance looked off across the lake again. "We don't normally reach out and ask someone like this," Vance said. "It's usually a lot longer process, but these times are complicated. Our first priority is to ensure the safety of the citizens of Grover County."

Mac cleared his throat. "If you don't mind my asking, just how big is your group?"

Vance shook his head. "Not at all. As of last muster, two days after the event, the militia stood strong at three companies throughout the county. We have reserve groups in the neighboring county to the west and south, but the bulk of our strength is here in Grover County."

Mac stepped away from the boulder and put his hands on his hips. "Company? As in company strength? A hundred and twenty men each? How are you all running this organization?"

Vance grinned. "We modeled our command structure after the Army."

Mac nodded. "Sensible choice. You read all the stories about militias...they sound like a bunch of rednecks out in the woods who want to play soldier..."

The smile vanished from Vance's face. "That's exactly the kind of stereotype we're trying to avoid. By having a rigid command structure in place at all times, accountability is transparent, front and center. In fact we're so strict with the rules and regulations, it's actually given rise to our biggest problem."

Mac didn't like the way that sounded. "Problem? What kind of problem? You mean with the local government?" Mac paused. "You being investigated by the FBI?"

What the hell am I getting myself into?

"No, nothing like that...at least not that I'm aware of. Hell, the Feds probably got dossiers on all of us, anyway." He looked up at the sky and laughed. "Not like that's gonna do them a whole hell of a lot of good now. But no, that's not what I was talking about. See, Colonel Byrd runs things exactly the way he did when he was in the Marines."

He won't allow anybody to get away with shit. You disobey the rules, you're out."

Mac nodded. "I think I like this Col. Byrd. Sounds like an officer with some sense."

Vance grinned. "He'd probably be happy to hear you say that, MacKinnon."

"Call me Mac, my friends all do."

"Fair enough. Anyway," Vance said, pausing to spit a glob of tobacco juice on the ground again. "Back about ten years ago, we had a few guys that were a little rough around the edges and wanted to drag the militia into the realm of those 'overthrow the government' guys. They got us into some hot water in Washington, and Byrd had to expel them to get the heat off our back."

"Sounds like a good decision."

"Well, it was...but the Colonel can kinda be a little rough around the edges. It wasn't so much that he kicked them out, it was the manner in which he did it. Kinda ruffled some feathers and made a little bad blood."

"So why is that a problem now?" asked Mac, already guessing at the answer.

Vance put his hands in his pockets as if he was embarrassed. "Problem is, those boys went off and formed their own militia—the Northern Brigade. They're attracting a bunch of riffraff—half of them just want to go out and blow shit up on weekends. They go off and shoot their guns and drink a lot of beer and cause some trouble, basically giving anyone with the GCM a bad name. They're the ones the press loves."

Mac cursed. "Of course they are. So why are they a problem now?"

"Well, when they started out, there were only a few of them—but they've been recruiting from out-of-state, the internet, and anyone else they can get their hands on. I don't even know if they've done any background checks on the guys they've let join their group. Could be plants from the FBI in there, could be criminal gangs—anything. Problem is, they've been growing much faster than we have. They tarnished the reputation of militias. Where we used to be invited to parades and patriotic events throughout Grover County, there's only a handful of towns that still welcome us."

"I take it those are the towns you're trying to help?"

Vance nodded. "Primarily yes, but we also help anyone in need regardless of affiliation, even the towns that have openly welcomed the Northern Brigade since the impact."

"The Northern Brigade? They're big enough to have their own name?"

Vance looked out over the water. "Yup. There's not a whole hell of

a lot we can do about them, but they've been clashing with this. Causing trouble, protesting, getting the towns riled up against us by putting on a bad display. Then a couple days ago, one of our task forces sent out to deliver medical supplies to Nord disappeared."

Mac frowned and adjusted the rifle on his shoulder. He couldn't shake the feeling he was being watched. "What do you mean, 'disappeared'?"

Vance stooped to pick up a smooth pebble, turning it over in his hands, before he skipped it out across the water. "Command thinks there's some kind of radio interference, but I would be surprised if that was the case—a lot of things acting strange since CME hit, but comms have been getting better now. The first few days, yeah, the radios weren't worth shit. My opinion?" he asked, one eyebrow raised. "The Brigade attacked them. They've been threatening to cause trouble with us for a while, and now that the rule of law has basically crumbled away, they're ready to start some shit."

Mac took in this revelation and stepped closer to the water's edge. He mulled over whether or not the risk was worth the rewards. He still had to finish readying the compound for when Jay and Kate and the kids arrived.

Do I really want to be stepping into a militia Civil War here?

"I can tell by your hesitation—"

Mac turned and spoke, cutting off Vance. "I'm only hesitating because I appreciate you telling me the truth. Given me a lot think on. You've been open about your situation, so I will be, too. I've got some reinforcements of my own coming up soon. That's about all I'm comfortable revealing, but I'm not gonna be alone much longer."

Vance nodded. "That's good, no man should be alone in times like this. Listen, I'm not asking you to join the militia or anything; since we're neighbors, I just wanted to give you a heads-up on the situation."

"You think they'll actually try to take land?"

Vance moved over to his boat and untied the guideline. "Honestly, Jerry Meiner is just crazy enough they might do something like that. I don't rightly know. I was fresh meat when he got kicked out. But from what some of the old-timers tell, he's a bad seed. I heard he got kicked out of the Army for being too violent."

"Well, sounds like the sort of character that needed a good swift kick in the ass from his sergeant."

Vance laughed. "As a captain, I'm sure he would've made plenty use of that."

Mac snorted. "*Captain...*" he said sarcastically.

"Listen, me and the boys will keep watch over you until your friends arrive," Vance said. "If you need any help, somebody's always

watching the lake. Send up a flare or something, or raise me on the radio.” He handed Mac a sheet of paper with a frequency scribbled on it. “We got enough solar power that we run the radio nonstop. We’re always monitoring.”

“We?” asked Mac as he took the piece of paper.

“Yeah, me and my boys.”

Mac folded the paper and slipped it in one of his jacket pockets. Vance’s evident hesitation to reveal the identities of ‘his boys’ notwithstanding, Mac felt a lot better knowing there were friendly forces on the lake—or at least non-hostile forces nearby. He extended his hand.

“Sounds good to me. If I hear anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Likewise,” Vance said. “Keep your powder dry, friend.”

CHAPTER 5

JAY SAT ON HIS heels, massaging his hands as he stared at the pile of sticks, broken branches, and one wet log he'd scrounged up on their rest break. While the others went off into the bushes along the side of the road to relieve themselves, or eat a meager meal from some of the camping supplies they'd salvaged out of Mac's basement, Jay kept to himself, practicing his fire-starting techniques. He glanced down at the gravel where his book lay open to the section on starting a fire without traditional means.

"Any luck yet, Mr. C?" asked Hunter from behind the Tahoe.

Jay shook his head. "It's not as easy as they make it look on TV." He didn't quite hear what the young man said in reply, and Hunter moved away.

Jay knew in the back of his mind all he had to do was pop the cigarette lighter out of the Tahoe's dashboard and ignite the tinder he'd collected, but he didn't want to rely on the SUV—who knew how long they'd even have it. They were dangerously low on gas, and soon enough they'd need to stop and acquire fuel. At the rate they were going, Jay figured sometime that afternoon they'd run out of gas. Without the Tahoe, they'd be at the mercy of the elements—which meant he had to figure out how to start a fire, and fast.

"Okay, the list says flint and steel..." Jay said to himself, looking at the book. "Well, that won't work because we don't have any flint and I doubt I'd be able to hold the damn thing anyway..." He moved his grubby finger down the page. "Matches. Right, we're all out of those..." Next on the list was a magnifying glass.

"Really? Who carries one of *those* around?" Also listed was using a bottle of water to focus the sun's light on to a fine point. Jay squinted up into the cloudy sky. "Not likely."

On and on, he went down the list of ways to start fire. Every one he came across, Jay discarded. "No, no, no...none of this shit is going to work." Jay closed the book with a thump and rested his back against the Tahoe.

C'mon, you've got to think.

He looked down at his bandaged hands. Leah had done an impressive job of cleaning and wrapping the hand that appeared infected, even going so far as to use some of their precious supply of ointment, but the fingers still remained half-curved. He could hold things, but gripping anything with any strength was another matter.

If I don't get this fire going, I'm going to be next to useless.

"Hey honey, you want something to eat?" asked Kate, appearing around the SUV.

Jay shook his head and gestured at the pile of sticks and twigs. "If I don't get this fire going, there's no point in me eating."

"Don't say things like that!" she hissed, sitting down next to him. After a quick glance to see if any of the others were nearby, she spoke. "Just because you can't haul firewood or get into fistfights or something doesn't mean you're useless." She turned his face with her hands and planted a warm kiss on his lips.

"I did not claw and fight my way halfway across this fucking country to watch you shrivel up and die. I'm going to get you to Mac's place, we're going to get you all fixed up, and that's the end of it."

Jay smiled and looked down at his hands. "Even if we do get to Mac's and he gets me patched up, I think that kid may 've cut a tendon or something...see how this hand is still curled up? It's hard to control. My hands might be useless."

Kate smiled and let one hand drop in his lap. "Not *all* of you is useless..."

She squeezed.

Jay grinned. "Well..."

"Dad?" called Leah from the other side of the SUV.

Kate's hand went back to her bowl of food faster than greased lightning.

"Back here, *priya*," Jay called out, smiling at the hungry look in Kate's eyes.

It's been a long time for me, too. Funny though, that's the first time I've even thought of sex since all this went down...guess I've been too busy trying to figure out how to stay alive...

"I was just going to see if you wanted some...oh, hey Kate," Leah said with a smile. "I didn't know you brought him some food already."

Kate stood and dusted off her pants. "He won't eat, but feel free to try."

Jay watched the sway of his wife's hips as she walked away to check on Thom, standing guard with the shotgun a little ways down the road.

God, I love that woman.

"Dad, come on—you've got to eat. Your body is already weak and fighting off infection..."

Jay smiled at his daughter. "It's okay. Don't worry about me—you should eat. I'm trying to figure out how to start this fire," he said gesturing with one clawlike hand.

"A fire? What do we need a fire for? We need gas."

Jay stared at the dormant sticks on the ground in front of him.

“When we run out of gas, we’re going to need this fire. Now go eat and let me work on this before we get moving again.”

Jay blew warm air on his hands. One benefit of the throbbing in his palms was he didn’t feel the cold so bad as the others. Kate, Leah, and the boys all walked around with their hands clenched in pockets or under armpits.

His breath turned to vapor and drifted away on the breeze. Jay looked down at his meager tools. He had half a magnesium fire starter, and the little embedded metal rod that came with the knife Leah brought from school. He’d been shocked as all get out when his daughter pulled that knife out of her bag.

And Kate gave you the damn thing...

A grin creased Jay’s face. Kate had provided for his daughter even while he’d been oblivious to the threats she faced. To think it only took a few days for people to start looting and abandon the laws of civilization that they obediently followed just a few hours earlier.

Jay took a deep breath and went back to the knife. He was having trouble holding the leather-wrapped handle in his crippled hand. The pain flared again as he picked it up but he gritted his teeth and ignored it as best he could.

In the distance, he heard Kate call to Hunter, out in the field across the road near a little clump of young birch trees. Leah walked over to get Thom. They were preparing to leave.

Now or never, Cantrell.

Jay closed his eyes to prepare himself against the pain in his hand before looking down and starting the tedious process of shaving little slivers of magnesium from the block. He carefully scratched the knife against the soft metal, satisfied to see the blade peel little curls of the dull metal. The wind shifted and several peels skittered away.

Jay muttered a curse and tried again, sweat beading up on his forehead. *I have to do this. It has to work. It has to.*

After several more clumsy swipes with the knife, he had the beginnings of a little pile of magnesium shavings. He had his fire ready to light, using the dried leaves Hunter had brought him on the bottom, covered in shredded fibers stripped from a stick. Over that, he layered a handful of pine needles Leah had found. In neat stacks next to the fire, Jay had accumulated some wet sticks and a branch for the last trick.

He turned the knife blade to face up and scraped the back of Leah’s survival knife down the metal rod. Surprisingly, it sparked. Not a lot—and they didn’t land on his target—but it had worked. Jay grinned and tried again, blocking out the pain in his hands.

He increased the pressure on the knife blade to the point of screaming and gasped when a shower of sparks cascaded down the

length of the little ferrocerium rod, right onto his dry leaves.

"There it is, come on...*come on*..." he muttered. He thought he saw a faint wisp of smoke and struck the knife two more times. Then he was sure he saw smoke. A section of tinder turned gray, then black, then orange.

"Easy," he whispered, breathing onto the nascent fire. "Come on then...you can do it..." Another breath and the embers sparked to life. A tiny flame flickered among the dry material.

"Yessss...that's it," he hissed, careful not to impart too much air onto the baby fire. Jay blew one more breath, a little stronger this time, and the flame flickered, then flared, igniting the dry leaves and fibers. Jay added a little clump of pine needles, then another. When the needles glowed and curled, he added a few wet sticks.

"No—no!" he cried when the flame weakened. Eventually, with some more air, it wafted back into life and one of the sticks caught fire, then another. The wet wood hissed and sizzled and finally smoked. The flame grew into a fire and Jay added more wood.

"I did it!" he yelled.

Kate and Leah ran up just ahead of Thom. Hunter shouted and trudged through the snowy field as fast he could.

"Jay! What is it?" Kate asked.

Jay leaned back. "I made a fire!"

"Way to go, Dad!" Leah exclaimed. She dropped to her knees and gave him a hug. "It's beautiful!"

"Nicely done, Jay," Thom added when he walked up. He only gave the little flame a quick once-over, then turned back to watching the road. He took his guard duties seriously, something Jay was grateful for. He hated to admit it, but Thom's attitude went a long way toward making Jay comfortable with him around Leah.

"Whoa, he...has made...*fire*!" proclaimed Hunter when he clambered his way out of the ditch next to the guard rail. He stood there grinning and shaking the snow off his shoes and pants. "Awesome, Mr. Leah's Dad."

Kate squatted down and put her pink hands near the flame. "God, that feels good."

"It'd feel better if it was about three feet tall," Jay mumbled.

"That might take a little longer to get going with all this wet wood," Leah said.

"Once we figure out how to do this consistently," Jay offered, wiping his forehead with the back of his knife hand. "We can dry any wood we find. But when we get to Mac's, I'm sure he'll have lots of dry stuff already put away for the winter."

"This is great, Dad."

Jay smiled at his daughter. He looked at Kate but her expression

changed. "What?" he asked.

She stared at the smoke puffing up out of the fire and followed the trail into the air over the Tahoe. "That smoke. It's not much, but your wet wood is putting out more than I'd like. If we start a fire bigger than this, someone might be able to tell where we are."

Thom took a look at Kate, then turned and walked down the road without a word.

Jay glanced around, taking in the deserted farmland and snow-covered fields interspersed with pines and bare deciduous trees. "I don't think there's anyone around here for miles."

"All the same, I think we should put it out and get moving." She sighed and put her hands back in her coat. "We've only got about three hours of daylight left. Now that you know how to make a fire, we may need one tonight."

Thom walked back to the Tahoe. "I think she's right, Jay. I was only about thirty feet away over there," he said, motioning with the shotgun. "But I could easily see the smoke. It's a very thin stream, but against the white clouds up there, it stands out like someone drew a line in the sky. I don't know how far away you could see it, but it's definitely there."

Jay looked down at his creation. "Okay..." He sighed. "Let's put it out and get out of here." He let Leah help him up. "Uh..." He glanced around. "Anyone know how to put out a fire without water?"

Hunter laughed and scooped up some snow. "Will this work?" Without waiting for an answer, he dropped the handful of snow on the fire, smothering it instantly. A large puff of smoke went up as the snow impacted the flame, then it was gone.

Kate cursed. "Well, if anyone was looking, they'd definitely see that."

"Nice," muttered Thom.

"Sorry, man," Hunter replied.

Kate grinned. "Don't worry about it. Good thinking, by the way. Come on, everyone," she said, eyeing the empty fields. "Let's get going. We've still got a long way to go, and I'd like to cross into Michigan before dark."

It took longer than they'd expected, but Kate managed to drive them back across country to where their road intersected the highway. By now they were several miles north and west of the roadblock, and Jay considered them safe from the deprivations of the highwaymen back at the trap. With no traffic on the roads and most of the cars abandoned on the sides, Kate ignored all traffic signs and roared onto the highway, tires chirping on the pavement as she merged.

The mood in the car was subdued. Jay tried to ignore the outside

world and focus on reading and learning. If he was doomed to die an invalid, then by God, he'd learn as much as he could and pass that knowledge on to Leah.

"You see that clump of trees up there?" asked Thom.

"Yeah," Kate drawled.

"There's somebody walking around. I just saw movement."

"Really? I don't see anything...do you see any cars?" asked Leah.

"I got nobody back here, man," Hunter chimed in from the third-row seat.

Jay turned the page and continued reading.

"I definitely saw someone. Wait—see that? He just climbed on a motorcycle!"

Jay looked up. "A motorcycle?"

"Yeah, we haven't seen many of those..." Kate muttered.

"Is it just him?" asked Jay as they grew closer.

"So far—yes. See? There's a little house tucked away off the road behind that clump of trees."

"Maybe we should like, stop or something...you know? See if they can help Mr. Leah's Dad?" suggested Hunter.

Jay squinted in the distance at the trees, rapidly approaching along the side of the two-lane highway. True to Thom's words, a small white farmhouse stood tucked away behind the trees that lined a long farm driveway. He saw the movement at the same time as everyone else—a motorcycle rolled down the driveway with one person aboard, appearing in and out between the trees that lined the path.

"He's moving," Kate announced.

"Oh my God, is that a gun he's carrying?"

"Yeah, man, it looks like a rifle or something on his back!" said Hunter.

The engine changed pitch as Kate floored the gas pedal. Jay winced at the thought of all the gas being sucked up by the big V-8 engine. Getting gas was going to become more of a challenge as time went on. The further north they went from Indianapolis, the fewer and fewer cars they found along the side of the road.

"He's coming out to the road!" Thom called.

"No, he's stopping," Leah countered.

Kate kept her eyes on the road ahead. "This could be a trap—I'm going to watch the road, you guys let me know what he does."

"He's parkin' the motorcycle—he's at the end of the driveway," announced Hunter.

Jay watched Kate's shoulders tense. "Is he taking that long gun off his back?"

"Nope, he's just standing there next to the motorcycle. Wait, looks like he's got binoculars or something," said Thom.

“What?” asked Kate.

“Just keep going, he doesn’t look like he’s doing anything but watching us.”

Jay watched the stranger watch them as they roared past. In the blink of an eye, the man standing next to the motorcycle was gone.

“Hunter, keep an eye on that guy back there,” Kate advised from the driver seat.

“Roger dodger,” Hunter replied. “So far, he’s just watching us. Strange times, *mi amigos*.”

After a few more seconds, Kate eased off the gas and brought them back to normal highway speeds. “Well that was weird,” she muttered.

“Guys...he’s moving...” warned Hunter.

“Which way?” asked Thom in a tired voice. “Details would be nice.”

“He’s following us!”

The engine roared again as Kate put her foot down. “Hang on guys!”

“Wait, false alarm!” cried Hunter. “He just turned off on a side road and disappeared.”

“What?” Kate snapped as the engine returned to normal.

“Yeah, he slowed down and like, turned, you know? Like he was going to the grocery store something. No rush or anything. Very chill-axed.”

Kate’s eyes found Jay in the rearview mirror. “I got a bad feeling about that...” she mumbled.

Jay looked down at his book, ignoring the fresh blood on his new bandages. *I got a bad feeling about a lot of things...*

CHAPTER 6

MAC DUSTED THE SNOW off his gloves and surveyed his contraption. He needed a way to transfer supplies—mostly dried food—from his boat at the base of the hill, all the way to the crest where he'd set up a camp overlooking the island. He knew he was in fantastic shape for a 67-year-old, and some might consider him in good shape for a 30-year-old. However, he didn't want to give himself a heart attack hauling 50 or 60 pounds of gear up the side of a hill, so Mac chose to work smarter, not harder.

He'd tied off a pulley to a stout tree at the crest at the edge of the clearing on the top of the hill. Then he ran several links of paracord through the pulley and tied one end of the long rope to a rock he'd found and dug out of the ground, weighing almost half of his own body weight. He then brought the rope down to the bottom of the hill where he attached the other end to a toboggan carrying his supplies.

Mac hefted his pack, stuffed with the remainder of this trip's supplies, including matches in a waterproof box containing a first aid kit and spare radio. Settling everything on his shoulders, he picked up the guideline he'd tied to the end of the toboggan and uncoiled the rope holding everything in place. When the rope went slack, the large rock he'd balanced precariously at the crest of the hill rolled forward and began its tumbling, sliding path down the side of the hill. As it went, it tightened the rope through the pulley and dragged the toboggan up the side of the hill.

Mac laughed, holding on to the end of the rope and let the weight of the boulder give him extra momentum as he hiked. It wasn't exactly a ski lift, but it was a hell of a lot easier than walking unaided, and he almost forgot he carried 60 pounds of gear on his back.

Slipping, sliding, cursing and crunching his way through the snow and frozen underbrush, Mac quickly figured out how to put just enough of his weight behind the toboggan to keep the boulder falling downhill at a controlled pace. By the time he made it to the crest of the hill, he'd barely broken into a sweat. He lashed off the rope to keep the boulder from going out into the lake and set about unloading the toboggan. On the way back, he'd hold on to the rope and pull the rock up the hill while he walked down. Once at the bottom, he'd tie off the rope and the rock would be ready to roll down again, assisting him on his next trip up.

Congratulating himself on his ingenuity, Mac almost missed the

movement on the far side of the lake. His mind registered what his eyes saw a few moments later, and he looked up from the lashings on the toboggan. He squinted north and waited.

A few seconds later, he saw what had originally attracted his attention. A shadow slipped behind a tree where one shouldn't be and raced across a small clearing to hide behind another tree.

What the hell is this?

Vance had warned Mac before they'd parted ways the day before that he and his boys—who Mac assumed to be other militiamen—tended to run training exercises from time to time, practicing sneaking up on each other to keep their skills honed. Mac had come to find that Vance's house, while ideally situated as his personal retreat during the crisis, also served as a forward operating base for the Grover County Militia. So at any given time, men from across the county might stop by to resupply or rest.

Mac muttered under his breath about paramilitary types pretending to be soldiers and went back to removing the supplies from his toboggan. He moved over to a shallow depression in the ground from which he'd excavated the boulder he now used for hauling his supplies up and down the hill and dropped the first shrink-wrapped package of freeze-dried food into the rocky pit. When the contents of the toboggan had been added to the pile, he carefully covered the entire thing with a dull green tarp, staked the corners in the ground, then added some pine bows snapped from a nearby tree as cover. Mac walked to the north side of the hill, scooped up some snow, carried it back, and sprinkled it over the entire cache until it looked like nothing more than another snow-covered rock gracing the summit.

Mac brushed his hands on his snow pants and moved to his backpack. He'd found a hollow oak on the far side of the clearing the last time he'd come up and realized that the package of first-aid supplies he carried might just fit in the hole with a little gentle persuasion.

Five minutes and a cracked first aid kit later, Mac stepped away from the tree and grunted. The kit was indeed embedded inside the tree, but he could still see the corner of it sticking out of the hole.

"Not good enough...not good enough, dammit." Anybody who came up that side the hill would see a bright yellow object sticking out of the tree.

When he turned to look for something to plug the hole, he saw three more men across the lake appear out of the dense forest and move toward Vance's house. All three carried long guns.

"Something's not right." Mac dropped to a crouch, realizing how exposed he was on the summit in the middle of a clearing. He worked his way to the edge of the hill and grabbed his pack on the way.

Squatting under a pine tree, he fumbled at the outer pouch on his backpack, then bit down on his gloves and pulled his hands free in order to extract a compact pair of field binoculars.

Once sighted in, Mac's breath caught in his throat. There was no way the men he watched sneaking toward Vance's house were part of the Grover County Militia. Not with bright yellow FBI, CIA, and NSA insignias emblazoned on the back of their black jackets. Several intruders sported plate carriers and ballistic helmets.

Son of a bitch.

Mac reached into his pack and pulled his radio free, dialing in Vance's frequency. He looked out across the lake again and saw at least a dozen men, all dressed like the first group, rush toward the house from opposite directions. Mac raised the radio to his lips and paused. If he pressed the transmit button, anyone trying to triangulate any unusual radio signals would be able to find him. If the FBI was willing to charge up to Vance's house in the middle of a global crisis, they must've had a damn good reason.

Do I want that kind of heat coming down on me? Especially now with Jay and everybody about to show up?

Every fiber of Mac's being wanted to transmit a warning anyway, but something held him back. He'd warned Vance he didn't want to get involved in some militia civil war. He sure as hell didn't want to get involved in some kind of fight with the government. Vance had accepted that, and they'd agreed to not contact each other except under the direst of emergencies. To do so would expose them both to scrutiny they'd rather not deal with.

Mac realized he was too late to warn Vance when the first gunshots rang out. He dropped the radio and put both hands on the binoculars, watching the drama unfold.

Mac listened to the crackle and pop of distant gunfire echo across the lake. Vance was fighting back. Guilt washed over Mac—there was no way one man could hold out against so many attackers. Then he saw the first black-clad man fall to the snow. The attacking wave from the east side of the house paused. Another man went down, followed by the report of a rifle hidden inside the house.

Mac grinned. At least his neighbor wasn't going down without a fight, though Mac questioned the sanity of attacking federal agents. He couldn't tell who fired first, but after the two FBI agents went down, all hell broke loose.

Gunfire erupted on all sides of the house. They even had men approaching from the lake, creeping up behind Vance's zodiac, parked on the rocky beach just below the house. Smoke trickled out of an upstairs window.

"Dammit, man, you can't fight against these odds. Let them take

you into custody...”

A third government agent clutched his stomach and fell to the ground, writhing in the snow.

“This is getting out of hand,” Mac growled. “Much more of this and they won’t take you alive.”

That was when Mac heard the unmistakable bark of automatic weapons. He lowered the binoculars for a second, cocking his head to the side. Sure as shit, someone had let loose a long salvo from an honest-to-God, full-auto M4.

He put the binoculars back to his eyes. A three-man squad approached from the east, two of them covering a third who carried a much larger rifle. Mac zoomed in. “Holy shit, that’s a BAR!”

The machine gunner opened up on the house with a long stream of fire, the *rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat* echoing through the forest. The two men on either side of him let fly with their full-auto M4s. The eastern corner of the house quickly turned into Swiss cheese, and Mac held his breath, watching chunks of wood fly as the military hardware chewed up the log cabin and presumably anyone unlucky enough to be inside.

“My God...”

Things went from bad to worse when Mac saw a flash, then a ball of fire and smoke appear on the south entrance to Vance’s house. A second later, the muffled crump of a fragmentation grenade reached his ears. Before he could comment on the absurdity of federal agents throwing hand grenades at suspected militiamen, two more grenades detonated along the south face of the house.

“What the fuck is going on over there?”

Mac had seen enough. The constant crackle of gunfire continued to roll across the water. Whatever the federal agents wanted Vance for, it was quickly becoming a slaughter. It was one thing to stand by and watch your neighbor get arrested, it was quite another to stand by and watch him shot to pieces by trigger-happy jackbooted thugs.

Mac’s hand involuntarily reached for his M1 Garand. Colonel Byrd had given him the option of borrowing one of the militia’s sniper rifles, but Mac had declined, preferring to use his own weapon. He paused, his fingers touching the smooth polished wood of the heavy stock. From this distance, Mac knew he could easily take several of the agents out of the picture and level the playing field, but he wasn’t sure he wanted to bring the full wrath of the federal government down on his head.

His hesitation was the deciding factor. Mac watched as the gunfire paused and two men rushed the house. A few seconds later, they emerged dragging a third person between them. The other agents lowered their weapons and moved forward to gather around Mac’s neighbor, still held by two big men.

Mac put the binoculars back to his eyes. Head down, arms spread wide, and held by the shoulders, Vance looked like a rag doll.

“God *damn* it, man.”

A third agent who Mac considered a tad overweight to be part of a federal assault team, stepped forward and grabbed Vance’s head, tilting it back to speak in his ear. Unfortunately, the large man stepped right into Mac’s line of sight so he couldn’t see Vance’s face.

For a moment, Mac thought they were just investigating a dead body. Surely Vance had been killed in the onslaught. Then all three agents stepped back and Cedar Vance remained on his feet, wobbly, but standing. The portly agent turned to his left and right, saying something to the other men who gathered a step closer.

Then the leader drew his sidearm, put it to Vance’s forehead, and pulled the trigger. The sharp crack echoed across the lake and Mac almost dropped his binoculars. He was able to refocus in time to see Vance’s body collapse to the ground in a puff of snow, flat on his back with arms spread out.

“Holy shit...” Mac breathed. He didn’t know precisely what Vance had been involved with or why the government would come after him—especially in the middle of a global crisis—but if that’s the way they were going to treat him, then there was no way in hell Mac wanted to get involved. For the first time since the gunfight started, Mac felt relief at the thought that he hadn’t said anything over the radio.

The agents dispersed, some entering the house presumably to clear the residence, others to secure the perimeter. Mac lowered the binoculars as the leader holstered his weapon and looked down at the body. Mac turned and slid down the backside of his rock, disappearing from view for anyone who might be looking in his direction.

His mind raced. He thanked God that he’d been trying to haul supplies up to the top of the hill when the raid went down. He’d approached due east, in the direction of his compound, so the little Jon Boat he pulled up onto the rocky shore should be well hidden from view from anyone standing in Vance’s house.

However, that meant he couldn’t leave until the agents across the water left. There was no easy way for him to get across the lake—the only way for him to get home would be to get down to his boat, across the lake around the south side of the island, then hike all the way around the lake to the east.

Mac checked the time, then glanced at the sky. He only had a couple hours of daylight left. If he started now, he might be back at his house by midnight. Depending on how long the agents occupied Vance’s house, he might be able to leave as early as sundown, putting him safely home only 40 minutes later.

Mac returned to his observation post and pulled up the binoculars.

A large box truck rumbled down Cedar Vance's snow-covered driveway and rolled to a stop just behind the house, its ass sticking out into view.

Two agents walked up to it and opened the rear door, then climbed in. Several more followed. Mac frowned.

It sure as hell didn't look like any tactical assault vehicle he'd ever seen the government use. In fact, it looked more like an old, white-washed delivery vehicle.

Mac decided to wait out the federal agents and see if he could learn more about just exactly what the hell was going on. He knew Jay, Kate, and the kids were somewhere out there heading in his direction, but thanks to his self-imposed radio blackout, he had no way of contacting them. Mac cursed. Jay—for once—had been sticking to his lessons and not revealing his locations when he checked in with Mac at night.

Jay might stumble into some federal roadblock anywhere around here.

Mac couldn't take the chance of bringing more attention to the lake. He hoped that with Vance's death, the agents would take whatever they needed and leave.

Mac swallowed the anger that welled up inside him over the injustice of Vance's execution. It was a Brave New World, and evidently the federal government had decided to change how it treated people.

Two can play at that game...

CHAPTER 7

JAY WOKE UP, HIS face pressed against a window. He peeled his cheek off the cold glass and blinked. The car was pitch black and ice-box cold. He clenched his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering as he sat up. Pain glanced through his hand and wrist.

He looked down in the darkness. That was new—before, only his palm hurt, now it hurt to move his wrist.

That's not good...

Someone stirred in the seat next to him. "You okay, Daddy?" asked Leah around a yawn.

Jay cleared his throat. "Where are we?"

"We're almost out of gas," Leah mumbled. "We coasted into this little town on fumes. We've got to find gas here, or Kate says we'll have to start walking when the sun comes up."

Jay rubbed his eyes with the back of his less-injured left hand. "How long was I out?"

"About two hours," Leah said. "How are you feeling?"

"About as well as can be expected, I suppose," he lied. He was so hungry, it felt like his stomach wanted to eat his legs. And cold...

Jay rubbed his arms and winced at the pain in his hands. "So... where is this place? And where's Kate?"

"We're about an hour from the border, I think," Leah replied.

"That long?" asked Jay.

"She wanted to avoid Middlebury," added Leah. "So we went around."

"Did we run into any trouble? I guess I was really out of it..."

"Nope," sighed Leah. "It's been pretty smooth sailing. We've seen a couple cars driving around, so that actually gave us a little hope that someone was still alive around here. And Kate found this sweet strip mall, so we got that going for us..."

"What's in the strip mall?" he asked, rubbing his arms again.

"When we pulled in, the headlights lit up a hardware store," Leah said. "That's where Kate and Thom went."

"Is that it?"

"There's a gas station at the other end," Leah said, her voice flat, like she wasn't paying attention to the conversation.

Jay watched his daughter's silhouette as she peered out into the darkness. "What're you watching for?"

"Thom and Kate went to see if they could find anything useful at

the hardware store. There's probably all the gas we'll ever need right over there in the gas station, but without power, we'll never get it out of the ground."

Jay detected the note of longing in her voice. "There's got to be a way for us to get into it...did it look damaged?"

"The convenience store looked busted open—like everything else we've seen—but the gas station itself looked all right..." Fabric rustled as she turned in her seat to look at him, her eyes glistening in the dim light. "I guess."

"Where's Hunter?" Jay asked, wiping the mental fog from his mind at last.

"Oh, he went to the bathroom. He's been cooped up in the backseat almost the whole trip. I don't blame him for wanting to stretch his legs."

Jay squinted out the window, and in the moonlit darkness, spotted the silhouette of the looted strip mall. Several cars—or what remained of them—sat parked in the lot in front of stores he couldn't identify in the darkness. A light went off and on twice from the store in the middle of the shopping plaza.

"What was that?" Jay asked, his heart rate quickening.

Leah held her hands up, covering a flashlight. She clicked it on, then opened her hands and closed them in quick succession three times. She lowered the light and clicked it off.

"Uh..." Jay began.

"That's the signal from Kate. She blinked twice to let me know they're on the way back, and I blinked three times to let her know the parking lot is still clear."

Jay grinned. *Sounds just like Kate.* "And if the parking lot wasn't clear?" he asked.

"I would've blinked four times."

"Pretty smart."

A moment later, Kate and Thom jogged up to the car, their shoes crunching on broken glass, snow, and gravel. The sound echoed across the empty lot, making Jay grimace. They opened the front doors and climbed in.

Jay noticed with admiration Kate had shut off the interior dome lights, so the entire car didn't light up when they opened the doors. A few seconds later, Leah's door opened and Hunter appeared. She slid over into the middle seat next to Jay as Hunter climbed aboard.

"Glad to see you're awake," Kate announced once all the doors had been shut and locked.

"Yeah, guess I needed a nap," Jay replied.

"So what's it look like out there?" asked Leah.

"Not good," Kate muttered. "The place has been ransacked."

"Trashed," confirmed Thom.

"There's shit all over the place, things knocked off the shelves, cash registers gone, money scattered on the floor by the doors, and spray paint on every wall. Somebody definitely looted it."

"And the other stores," Thom added. "It's a mess."

"So did you get a good look at the gas station?" asked Jay.

"Other than the quick mart?" asked Kate. "No."

"I ran over there, though," said Thom. "It doesn't look too bad. A couple of the pumps have been damaged, like somebody was trying to break in and use them...but other than that, it looks like people only pulled the lids off one of the storage tanks. I can see tools out there on the ground, but they're covered in snow, so it looks like no one's been here for a while."

"So it's probably still got gas in there!" exclaimed Leah.

"Yeah, man, but without a way to get the gas out, it's like, useless and stuff," said Hunter.

"Or it's empty, and they gave up..." Thom added.

"We don't know that. All we have to do is figure out how to get the gas out..." Kate muttered.

"Dad, is there anything in one of those books...?"

Jay looked at the book on the seat next to him. "This thing is a compilation of articles and how-to knowledge from the pre-industrial time...most of this stuff is from the 1800s to early 1900s. I mean, the techniques are still sound, but..."

Kate turned around in the driver seat. "But what?"

Jay open the book, ignoring the flare of pain in his hand. "I just had an idea...I wonder if there's anything in here that talks about irrigation."

"Irrigation? What does that have to do with getting gas out of underground tanks?" asked Thom.

"Did they even have like, gas stations back then?" asked Hunter.

Jay looked up. "No...not really." Kate snorted in the front seat.

"Leah, hand me your flashlight," Jay said.

"Whoa, if you want to turn it on, here—take my coat and cover yourself with it," Kate said.

"Oh, right." Jay took her coat and turned on the light. Blinking back the tears the sudden brightness brought to his eyes, he quickly leafed through the book, skipping to the section on aquaculture and irrigation on the family farm. He found all sorts of topics and articles ranging from how to bring water from a river to a lower lying farm by digging trenches, to creating gutters and downspouts on a house, to digging wells...

"There!" he announced.

"What? What is it?" asked Kate.

"Instructions on how to make a well pump!"

"A well pump? You mean like for drinking water?" asked Hunter.

Jay clicked the flashlight off and pulled Kate's coat over his head.

"Exactly! Only we'll use it to pull up gasoline!"

"You think the hardware store will have the parts we need?"

"I didn't study the diagrams in detail, but it looked like we should be able to convert most of the cast iron parts that they list into PVC... maybe we can scrounge up stuff in the store..."

"Can this like, really work?" asked Hunter.

"Only one way to find out!" said Kate. "Okay—Thom and I will get across the parking lot. When you see my flashlight, come on over."

"You really think that's necessary?" asked Jay, peering out into the darkness. "There's nothing moving out there..."

"I know, but I also can't shake this feeling that we're being watched."

"Well, I suppose it won't hurt to be a little extra cautious."

"Okay, wait for my signal," said Kate. She opened the door and slipped out into the darkness followed by Thom.

Once everyone had gathered inside the store and Kate triple-checked they were indeed alone, Jay called out parts he thought they might need. It took over an hour of sorting through the store's remains but he eventually had all the parts necessary to make a crude water pump.

"There," he said, wiping sweat from his forehead. "I think that'll do it."

Kate looked at him. "You have any idea what you're doing?" she whispered.

"Not a clue," he mumbled.

"Okay," Kate said louder. "Thom, why don't you take the shotgun and go watch the front door. Hunter..."

"If it's all the same with you guys, I'd like to, you know, help out." He twirled the flashlight in his hand. "I mean, I've always been good at puzzles, you know?"

"Are you trying to say that you want to help me put this thing together?" asked Jay.

"You got it, man."

Jay and Kate shared a look. She shrugged. "There's two other doors," she said. "Leah and I can cover those while Thom watches the front with the shotgun."

"I'm okay with that," Leah said.

"Fair enough," Jay sighed. "Okay, Hunter, first we try to figure out what this part here does..."

The reformed pothead knelt next to Jay and looked at the illustration in the beam of Jay's flashlight. They had rigged up several

boxes and tarps to cover a section of the store so they could use their flashlights without being seen from the outside. Thom worked his way around the crinkling tarp and disappeared into the darkness at the front of the store.

"No disrespect, Mr. Leah's Dad, but should we really worry about what it does? I mean, it's like, a pump, right?"

"Right..." prompted Jay. "You can call me Jay, Hunter."

"Okay. So why don't we just build it, then see if it works? I mean, I don't really need to know what this do-hickey does, do I? I just need to know that we need a pipe that looks like this," he said pointing at the diagram. "And fits into something else that has a spot for a crank, like this," he said, sliding his finger across the drawing.

"Hunter, you never cease to amaze me."

"Yeah, I hear that a lot, man..."

Several hours later, when Jay's hands were cracked, bleeding, and throbbing in pain, and the sun was kissing the eastern sky, Kate burst through the rear entrance to their little workshop with a big smile on her face.

"What's up?" asked Jay.

Hunter glanced up from his workstation on the ground, hunched over a pile of parts.

"Got any gas cans out here?" Kate asked. "Or anything we can use to hold gas?"

"There's probably something over there in that section," Jay said gesturing at the far side of the store with one bandaged hand. "Why? Did you find some gas?" he asked, unable to hide the smile on his tired face.

"You bet your ass I did!" Kate beamed. "This place sells lawnmowers. They got a dozen push mowers in the back. But...each one of them has a little gas. We found a piece of tubing back there, rummaging around in the warehouse. All I need is a container to put it in, and we can siphon out the gas from all those lawnmowers."

Hunter sat back on his heels. "That would've been, like, awesome to hear about three hours ago, man..."

"Tell me about it!" muttered Leah as she walked around the corner. "We've been sitting back there staring at these damn things for two hours until we finally decided to take the lid off one and look."

"That's wonderful!" said Jay. "How much do you think we can get?"

"Not very much—maybe just a gallon or two—but hey, it's something," replied Kate.

She emerged from behind a pile of boxes with a red plastic gas can. "If nothing else, we'll at least get something," she said, looking at the Frankenstein contraption on the floor.

“Don’t worry,” Jay said. “It’ll work. It has to.” He met her eyes and held her gaze for a moment before she nodded and disappeared into the back room again.

Jay turned back to his apprentice. “I think it’s about time we test this, don’t you?”

“Totally. I’d like to do this before sunrise...it feels weird walking around outside in light, you know?” Hunter laughed nervously. “It’s like, we’re vampires or something, man.”

“Guys!” hissed Thom from the front door. “We’ve got trouble!”

“What is it?” called Jay.

“I got about five or six people comin’ across the parking lot,” Thom replied around the corner. “They’re headed right for the car.”

“Thom, back away from the windows and get into the interior of the building,” Kate called as she walked around the corner, wiping her hands on her pants. “Leah,” she said over her shoulder, “keep getting that gas!”

“We know you’re in there!” a rough voice called from outside.

“Everyone hide,” hissed Kate.

“Come on out, looters!” someone else yelled.

“Fuckin’ thieves! Things aren’t bad enough out here? You gotta go and take what little we got left?”

“Kate,” whispered Leah in the darkness.

“Did you get the gas?”

“I’m working on it—there’s still three left.”

“Hunter—get back there and help her,” whispered Jay.

“Right on.”

“I’m warning you, get out here with your hands up—”

“Or what?” yelled Kate.

“You hear that?” one of the men outside asked.

“Sounded like a woman.”

“Are you kidding me?” exclaimed a third. “Now what do we do?”

“I ain’t fightin’ no woman, Keith.”

“Shut up, both of you,” said the first voice.

“Look, we don’t want any trouble. We’re just trying to find enough gas to keep moving,” Kate yelled.

“Well...” the man replied.

“Say somethin’!” said one of his comrades.

“Shut up—I will! That’s our gas you’re planning on stealing!”

“You got a way to pull it out of the ground?” asked Kate.

“No...not exactly. But we’re working on it!”

Kate looked at Jay. “We do.”

Several tense moments passed with nothing but muttering from outside. Jay scratched at his beard and massaged his aching hands. If the men outside decided to rush the store, he didn’t know if any of his

little band of survivors would live to see the sunrise.

"How's that?" one of the other voices called. "We don't have any electricity to run them pumps."

"We uh...we made a hand crank pump," offered Jay.

"What's that?"

"Damn they got *another* one in there..."

"Sssh! Let Keith talk."

"A hand crank, you say?"

"Why the hell didn't you think of that, Jackson?"

"Shut *up*," said Keith.

"We're coming out!" Kate announced. "I think we can work out a deal here."

"Nice and slow now..." replied someone from outside.

"Thom, can you see them?" whispered Kate.

"Yeah...there's just enough light."

"Good—keep an eye on them—especially the leader...Keith, if you can figure out who that is. Keep a bead on them and pull the trigger if you see me scratch the back of my head, okay?"

There was a slight pause before he answered, but Thom said, "Okay."

"How many of you are in there?"

"Four of us," Kate said immediately. "We're unarmed, so hold your fire."

Kate motioned for Hunter and Leah to move forward and join her and Jay. "You get the gas?"

"Just finished, but yes," replied Leah.

"Good. If this goes sideways, you, Hunter, and Thom get the gas and make a run for the Tahoe. I think there's enough in the tank to get you out of here, then you can stop and refuel, but you won't have much—"

"I'm not leaving without you," Leah said, her voice unyielding as she refused the keys Kate offered.

Kate looked at her, then put the keys back in her pocket. "No, you're not, are you?"

"Let's go, I'm freezing my ass off out here," complained one of the men outside.

"No tricks!" someone warned.

"Oh shut up—like you're a cop or something—"

"Hey, I got my badge—"

"Rent-a-cop don't count!"

"Okay, here we come!" Kate called out to silence the bickering.

"Jesus, they got a couple of *kids* with 'em, Keith," the shortest one said when Jay and the others lined up outside the front of the store.

Three men stood before them, all dressed in plaid winter hunting

gear, all armed with bolt action rifles. When they saw Leah and Kate emerge from the store, they all lowered their weapons.

"If you're not here to loot, why are you here?" asked one.

"We're on our way north, to Michigan," began Jay.

"Michigan! Good luck with that," the short one said. "They got the border locked up tighter'n a sixteen-year-old's—"

The tall one smacked his partner on the back of the head, knocking his ear-flapped hat to the ground. "Watch it, shorty."

"You and your morals," muttered the little man as he bent to pick up his hat.

Jay took note of the fact that he didn't argue with the taller man. That was significant, he felt.

"Look, we've been on the road for longer than I can remember, our house was burned to the ground, and all our neighbors are dead... we're trying to make it to...a friend's place up north. If you could just —"

"You ain't with the government? Not here to drop off supplies?" asked the one on the left, a wide shouldered, pot-bellied man who sported a thick, bushy beard. His eyes were lost in the dark shadows cast by his wide brow, but somehow Jay knew they were too small for his square face.

"I'm afraid not," Kate said. "I was in the Air Force a while ago, but —"

"You heard what's going on out there? Are we at war?"

Kate shared a look with Jay. "No...it was the sun."

"I knew it!" the short one said. "I said so when we saw the lights— Keith, I said, that ain't natural. Didn't I say that?"

"Shut up, Lenny."

"Look," said Jay, stepping forward. He motioned for Hunter to bring forth the pump. "We built this pump using parts from the store...it should allow us to get some fuel out of the underground tanks over there. Maybe we can make a trade—we'll let you use—"

A yelp from inside the store made everyone look.

A large man dragged Thom out of the shadows. "Lookie what I found, boys! This little shit about blew my head off with this scattergun." He tossed Thom's shotgun to the leader.

"This here looks official." He squinted at the barrel. "Brookville PD." He glanced at his partners, then looked at Jay. "You cops?"

"No," Jay said quickly. He explained the wrecked cop car he found when he arrived at Leah's school. "It was abandoned, and we needed protection, so I took it."

"Well, well, well...so you are looters."

"No! It's not like that—" began Kate.

"Shut the hell up, bitch, ain't no one talkin' to you."

This time, Keith didn't reprimand his short friend. Jay swallowed. That wasn't a good sign.

"Here's the deal. With gas, we can get some cars running, a genny or too—we'd be the new kings in town. Nobody's got heat or anything...there's plenty of frozen food in town—most people are starvin' cause they can't cook anything," Keith said. He scratched his beard and looked at Lenny, the short one.

"Go on, Keith, take it, man. We'll be gods."

"There's got to be a solution to this where we both benefit," Jay said.

Lenny laughed. "Oh, hell no. We caught you dead to rights in Harry's store, looting. And you got stolen police property. You people are nothing but trouble and we don't have the resources in town to take care of troublemakers."

"But—" began Leah.

"Hand it over son," Keith said, stepping forward and reaching toward Hunter.

"No! We only need a little gas," Jay began, placing himself between Keith and Hunter.

Keith swung his fist so fast, Jay didn't even see it—he felt the impact against the side of his head, his teeth clacked together, then he felt an instant of weightlessness. The next thing he knew, he was on the ground looking up at Keith as the local stripped their pump from Hunter and shoved the younger man back.

"Dad!" Leah screamed.

"Leah, don't!" yelled Thom.

Lenny lunged forward and tried to grab Leah to keep her from reaching Jay, and in that moment, chaos erupted.

Kate struck like a snake and landed a kick to Keith's knee. As he fell forward with a grunt of pain, Thom whirled on his guard and in a flurry of punches and kicks, forced the bigger man away from Hunter.

"Get 'em!" Keith grunted as he hit the ground, trying to fend off the next round of Kate's blows. He never said anything else—she landed a knee to the back of his head and he crumpled to the snow.

Thom yelled something in Korean and Jay blinked when he saw a body fly through the air and land on Keith. Kate and Thom stood shoulder to shoulder, facing the two stunned locals who still remained on their feet.

Leah picked up Thom's shotgun and aimed from the hip. "I've never used one of these things, but I think all I have to do is pull this trigger, right?"

"Oh jeez, kid, hold on a second—"

"I don't want any trouble!" said Lenny, throwing his hands up in the air.

The man on top of Keith groaned and stirred, but Kate silenced him with a kick to the head. She turned back to Lenny and the other man. "Drop your weapons. Now."

"But—"

"Leah, pull the trigger."

"Okay, *okay!*" blurted Lenny as he removed the hunting rifle from his shoulder and dropped it on the ground. His partner did the same, the second rifle clattering to the snow-dusted parking lot.

"Hunter, grab those guns," Kate said as she helped Jay to his feet. "You okay?"

"I'm still seeing stars, but I think so, yes." He looked down at the discarded pump. The brief fight had resulted in the pump being stepped on or dropped—it didn't matter which—and broken into several pieces. "Oh no..."

"Never mind that," Kate said. "Leah, give me the shotgun. Good—now you and Thom grab the gas we collected—"

"What gas?" demanded Lenny, his hands still in the air.

"You got a Walmart near here?"

The quiet one chuckled. "You think this is Fort Wayne? We got us a Kmart here, lady."

"Well," Kate said as she covered Leah and Thom. "I suggest after we leave, you go check out the lawnmowers."

"What?" asked Lenny. "Who's going to need..." He lowered his arms. "They got gas in 'em?"

"Mmhpm," Kate grunted. "Not a lot, but enough that the engines aren't sold bone dry, or maybe so they could fire up demos—I don't know—but every one of the ones here had a little gas. We got enough to get well down the road and out of your hair. How you want to deal with this," Kate said, gesturing at the men on the ground, "is your call. We're out of here."

"But—" began Lenny, his eyes on what was left of Jay's hand pump.

"It's yours," he said quickly. "It looks more complicated than it is. Just snap it back together and maybe it'll work."

"Good luck with the king stuff and all," said Hunter as Thom and Leah shuffled by, each carrying a jug of gasoline.

"Okay, everyone to the car, I'll cover us," Kate said.

"You really are extraordinary," Jay said to his wife, as he accepted Hunter's arm for support. He hobbled along after Leah and Thom toward the Tahoe.

"I know," Kate and Hunter said at the same time.

Jay watched the gas cans in his daughter's hands. *Maybe we'll make it after all...*

"You ain't gettin' away with this!" called out Lenny as the group

reached the Tahoe. "We're gonna find you!"

"Everyone in the car," Kate ordered, holding the shotgun on Lenny and the locals until the last door shut.

"We're all in," Jay declared from the front seat. He leaned over to look at Kate out the open driver's door. "Let's go."

Kate got in and started the SUV. "Hang on everybody, we need to get the hell out of Dodge." She floored it and the big Tahoe lurched forward and out of the lot.

"Later, assholes!" Hunter jeered from the way back.

"We're not out of the woods, yet," Kate said. "We'll need to stop just outside of town to refuel. The gas light's been on for a while."

"At least we can refuel now," Thom added.

Jay sank into his seat and closed his eyes against the dull ache in his hands. *One more day. Just get us through one more day...*

CHAPTER 8

LEAH COULD ONLY TAKE so much. Sitting in silence while her father tried over and over again to raise Mac on the radio was driving her crazy. She didn't know how everyone else could do it, staring out the window, listening to Jay call out for Iceman to pick up and hearing nothing but static in reply. Kate had the easiest job—she was driving, so at least she had the excuse of paying attention to the road—but everyone else just stared out their windows.

"Iceman, this is Mongoose, come in," Jay said again.

Leah leaned over toward Thom until their shoulders touched. He flinched, then turned to halfway face her.

"You okay?" she whispered.

Thom moved his shoulder in what she hoped was a shrug. "I guess..." He turned back and looked out the window again. "I'm just worried about my family, you know?" he mumbled.

"Iceman, come in!" Jay said.

Leah felt guilt rise in her stomach like bad Chinese food. "Oh my gosh, Thom, I'm so sorry...in all this we never bothered to stop and ask—"

"It's okay, Leah, really...my parents are probably just fine. They're survivors, they always have been. It's my grandma I'm worried about."

"Your grandmother?"

Thom nodded. "Yeah, my dad's mom. She wasn't doing so well before...all this. We had to put her in a nursing home a couple months ago, and she hates it there. I just..."

In the darkness, Leah reached out and found his hand and squeezed. He squeezed back, and an increasingly familiar tingle crackled its way down the backs of her legs.

"Do you want to tell me about your grandmother ? Sometimes it helps to talk things through, you know?"

"Iceman! Iceman, this is Mongoose. If you're reading me, we are still on the move. Everyone accounted for and okay. The..." Jay frowned in the glowing light of the radio in his hands. "Let's just say the delivery date has been adjusted...we're aiming for..."

"I'd say two more days at this rate," Kate offered from the front seat.

Her father clicked the transmit button again. "Looks like a two day-delivery at this point. Over."

They all listened to the silence for a moment.

"Two more days," Hunter mumbled from the backseat.

"It seems like forever," Thom whispered as he stared out the window.

Leah knew someone needed say something, but she didn't have the words—no one had the words for what had landed on them in the past week. She squeezed Thom's hand again, and a reckless impulse gripped her. With a sigh, she lowered her head onto Thom's shoulder.

"We'll get through this...you'll see," she whispered.

Thom continued to hold her hand, but offered no other response, though she did feel a slight relaxing of his body as he adjusted to the weight of her head on his shoulder.

What am I doing?

Her heart raced. His scent was almost overpowering—in a good way. Granted, none of them had enjoyed a decent shower in over a week, but there was something comforting about the way Thom's clothes smelled. Earthy, masculine, safe. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the feeling of his warm hand in hers. For a moment, holding his hand, resting her head on his shoulder, and listening to the hum of tires on asphalt, things could've been normal.

"Jay, honey, I don't think he's going to answer," Kate said from the driver's seat.

"But..."

"You may as well save the batteries. He's not going to reply, and that means..."

"Whatever it means, it's not good," Dad admitted.

Kate cleared her throat. "That's right, and you don't want to give away too much information, or spend so much time talking on that thing that someone can triangulate our location."

"They can do that while we're moving?" Jay asked in a quiet voice.

"I don't know. After the CME, I don't know what anybody's capabilities are—and more importantly I don't know who would be trying to find us. I just know that it's what Mac would say..."

"She's right," Leah spoke up. "Mac would tell us to stay smart, stay quiet, and stay safe. If he's alive, he's listening, Dad."

If he's alive...good God, listen to me!

Her father sighed, but put the radio away. "You're probably right. It's...maybe he's just having equipment problems."

"It could be anything, Jay. The point is not to get worked up over it," Kate said. "We have to assume everything is fine, and he's listening. By the way, that was quick thinking about the two-day delivery—nicely done."

Hunter rustled around in the back seat before his voice broke silence. "Guys...I think I see somebody behind us."

"Where?" called out Kate. "I don't see any—wait...it looks like somebody's got a headlight back there that's covered up or something...I can just barely see it."

"Well that's good," Leah said raising her head off Thom shoulder. "That means they're a long way back, right?"

"No way, man. There's some dude on a red motorcycle—he's close!" warned Hunter.

"How close? That light doesn't look very close at all," Kate said.

"Oh shit, he's *right*," Thom added, turning in his seat. "Looks like a couple hundred yards back, I can just barely make it out."

"I think it's that same dude who was scopin' us before!" Hunter exclaimed. "He's got those little spiky things on the top of his helmet, you know?"

The pitch of the engine changed again, and they picked up speed. "Okay, Jay, give me a turn off."

Kate glanced at Dad. "No, forget the coat, he already knows we're here—don't worry about the light. We need the map, now get us off this road."

Thom set up in his seat and squeezed Leah's hand. "What're you gonna do?"

"We have to try to lose him through one of these towns. Jay, got anything for me?"

"I'm looking, I'm looking..."

"Too late—here's a turnoff, hang on!" Kate said. She spun the wheel, and they skidded around the corner and down the exit ramp.

"Is he still back there?" Leah asked.

"Yeah, man! He just got on the exit ramp," Hunter reported.

"That sign up there says the town is to your left," Thom called out.

"Got it," Kate responded.

They squealed around the corner and drove another mile before they entered a sleepy, snow-shrouded hamlet. Zipping by parked cars and abandoned vehicles, the outer edge of Aaron looked like any small Midwestern town would look in December.

Kate took random turns, driving them deeper and deeper into the little town, following residential side streets. They noticed an alarming rate of burned houses and buildings the deeper they got into town, and Thom called out more than one body laying on the road.

"Good grief, some of these buildings look like they've been a hit with artillery!" Dad observed.

"What the hell happened here?" Leah mumbled as they raced down side streets and back alleys, trying to lose their pursuer.

"He still back there?" asked Kate after one particularly sharp turn.

"I don't see him," Hunter said, rustling around in the back among the dislodged supplies.

“Wait—there he is! He’s still back there,” Thom said over the Tahoe’s engine.

“Shit, I got him—looks like whatever he had covering his headlight fell off.”

“He’s not getting any closer, though,” Leah observed. “It’s like he’s just following us to see where we go.”

“But unfortunately, he can go wherever we can go—and a lot easier on that bike than we can in this big bitch.”

“That’s the second road that’s been blocked off with cars,” Dad announced, pointing left.

“I see it, I see it—hang on!” Kate said, whipping the wheel hard to the right.

Leah looked out the window and saw a playground rush past, peaceful and serene. *What happened to us?*

“Lights—I got lights on the left!” Thom yelled.

“Go right, go right!” Dad called out.

“Okay! Here we go, hold on again!” Kate said.

Leah held on to Thom as the Tahoe took another corner, tires chirping on the pavement.

“He’s still back there!” Hunter said.

“I know, *I know!*” Kate snapped. “Seems like half the roads in this town have been blocked with abandoned cars.”

The thrill of being next to Thom and holding his hand had disappeared and Leah was left with a growing sense of fear. “It’s a trap,” she whispered.

“Shit!” Kate said. “Hold on, this is gonna be tight!”

“Look out!” yelled Dad. “There’s not enough room—“

Squealing tires fought with Leah’s scream as the Tahoe lost traction and skidded through the partially blocked intersection. Thom braced his shoulders and threw one arm in front of Leah’s torso as they skipped the curb and slammed broadside into a building.

CHAPTER 9

MAC SHIFTED HIS WEIGHT on the observation deck atop his house, brushing snow from his gloves. He adjusted the dial on his rifle scope one solid click at a time and rested his cheek against the stock again. He'd been watching the activity at Vance's place all day through binoculars, but when a new group of federal agents arrived in the afternoon, he thought it prudent to pull out the long gun with its more powerful scope. He did not like what he saw.

"What the hell are you jackasses doing over there?" It'd been a day since the gunfight, and yet the feds still picked through the wreckage of Vance's house. Someone had lit a fire and the trail of smoke drifted up into the sky, visible for miles around.

Mac reached back and rubbed at his right leg, trying to ease the cold, cramping hamstring. He'd been outside his shelter for a couple hours already, and his body reminded him it needed a break.

Yet he couldn't.

Mac had heard Jay's third attempt to make contact in the long, dark night and was too scared to communicate. If he had so much as pushed the transmit button, he knew the G-men across the lake might detect where he was and come get him.

Mac wasn't worried so much about his own safety; he was more concerned the federal agents would take over his compound and be there to surprise Jay, Kate and the kids when they showed up. That wasn't a risk he was willing to take. So he had to keep an eye on his new neighbors.

As he watched and debated what to do, replaying Jay's last transmission over and over in his mind, he saw another box-truck roll up to Vance's house and park out of view. Several agents climbed aboard. Mac shifted his rifle to follow as three, then four—then five—men emerged from the house and approached the truck.

They spent about 15 minutes milling around, talking, and pointing across the lake in different directions before finally they all climbed up into the truck and the rolling door came down.

Mac held his breath as the truck rumbled out of view and then reappeared heading up the driveway. He ignored the truck for a moment and shifted his rifle to scope out the windows in Vance's house that he could see. Mac paused just long enough to scan the interior of what he could see from each room.

No movement. Mac shifted to the next window. Nobody there. He

moved on to the next window. His heart beat faster. Mac opened his left eye and found the truck moving in and around the trees that lined Vance's driveway up and away from the lake. The bulky truck rumbled toward the access road on Vance's side of the lake.

Mac swept his rifle back and forth across the windows in Vance's house one more time before raising his face from the rifle stock.

"Why the hell are you leaving?" he asked the cold air. As he watched, the white truck disappeared over the final crest, working its way toward the main road.

Mac sat up, groaning in relief as his cold joints stretched and moved. He brushed the snow off his gloves and arms, then stared down at the rifle.

What are they up to? Are they leaving? He didn't like the way that several of the men had pointed in a sweeping motion around the lake.

Goddammit—I just know you assholes are gonna start combing around the lake. It's what I'd do.

He snorted. *I would've done it yesterday, but you guys work for the federal government so I'm not surprised you're a day late and a dollar short.*

Mac stood and picked up the rifle off the observation deck. He carefully capped the delicate lenses on the massive scope and slung the heavy rifle over his shoulder.

"The question is," he said, his breath turning to vapor in front of his eyes, "what the hell do I do now?"

Mac mulled over his options as he clambered down through the open hatch and pulled it shut behind him. He came down the rough-hewn ladder from the observation deck and stood there on the upper floor of his house, dripping snow in the relative warmth.

He really only had two options. Stay in the house and keep watch while trying to maintain a low profile and light discipline. He leaned his rifle against the loft railing and peered down into the brightly lit interior of the first floor.

Or...I grab some gear and head out into the woods. If they drive straight here, they could be at my door in ten minutes. If that's what they're doing, I need to be gone.

Mac grimaced. Ten minutes—it wasn't a lot of time for an old man.

He clambered down the steps, walked over to the side door and unlocked it. He cracked the door and took a quick look around the immediate surroundings. Leaving the door cracked, Mac turned and walked into the kitchen, grabbing his day pack from its position by the door as he moved. He rummaged through the kitchen, grabbing a few bottles of water out of the fridge and dropping them into the pack.

Standing next to the pantry, he grabbed a plastic bag marked "go

bag” in big bold letters, lifted the contents—which mostly included emergency lifeboat rations and power bars with a few granola bars and Pop-Tarts thrown in for good measure—into the pack and closed it.

Mac put his shoulders through the straps, cinched everything tight, and picked up his AR-15 from the kitchen countertop. He slung that over his shoulder, checked the holster with his 1911 .45 ACP strapped to his hip and moved to the side door again.

He checked one more time to make sure all the lights were out and listened to ensure that his generator was off-line.

Everything looks good. The solar cells he’d hidden up in the hills and ravines north of his compound gave him plenty of power during the day, but it’d been cloudy for the last two days and so he’d relied on his gas generator to power the fridge and lights inside.

Anyone driving by would miss his cabin, nestled as it was in the valley of a large ravine overlooking the lake. Mac insured he had a nice wall of thick pine trees shielding view of his house from the road when he’d built the place. However, anyone who actually found the house and went inside would immediately know someone was currently living there.

There was no hiding the fact that he’d had breakfast this morning—his plates and bowls were still in the sink.

“Well, nothing I can do about that.” He grabbed his hiking staff, stepped outside, then shut and locked the door.

Mac dropped his keys in his coat pocket, zipped it, and trudged off into the snow.

He purposely went through the deepest snow, leaving tracks away to the west. If anybody showed up, he wanted them to follow his tracks down toward the lake.

As he marched through the snow, he merged onto a well-worn path that went down the side of the hill. As his boots disappeared into the dirt of the cleared path, Mac was confident that anyone following him would assume he stayed on the path and continued on his course downhill.

Mac walked along the cleared trail until he spotted a side branch of the trail that offered enough space for him to walk without leaving tracks. Without hesitation, he stepped off the main trail and worked his way up the ravine, staying clear of any snowfall.

Going from rock and clear spot to clear spot, Mac slowly worked his way up the ravine to the crest. Pausing there to catch his breath, he surveyed his cabin.

The snow on the observation deck had been disturbed by him laying there to get a good view of Vance’s cabin, but there was nothing he could do about that. Anyone who got as close as he was

now couldn't help but see the house. The important thing was he couldn't see his own tracks. If the agents showed up at his place, they wouldn't see where he'd gone.

Mac worked his way east of his house, heading parallel to the access road that took travelers out to the loop around the lake. He knew the agents would be arriving on that road, and he wanted to be well off the beaten path if they came in his direction.

Mac continued east until the access road to his house curved ahead of him and crossed a small bridge over yet another jagged ravine. Instead of risking being spotted as he crossed the road, Mac worked his way down the ravine and passed underneath it. He emerged on the other side, secure in the knowledge that any footprints he left now would not lead anyone anywhere important.

Moving faster, Mac trudged in a more or less straight line heading southeast toward the main road. That was the direction Jay would approach from. He hoped Jay and Kate wouldn't arrive too soon—that would make a fine mess of things if the agents decided to investigate his house.

The sound of an engine caused Mac to freeze. He listened for a second to determine the direction and decided it came from the loop around the lake. He turned in that direction, then slipped behind the trunk of a big oak. Through the trees in the distance, he spotted the white truck on the road, paused at the intersection between the loop and the access road to his house.

Mac pulled out his field binoculars and studied the agents spilling from the box-truck. They were all armed with long weapons but it didn't make any sense—the government must be scrounging up anything they could because some of them carried M4s, others had AR-15s, and a few carried rifles with the unmistakable banana-shaped magazine of the AK-47.

Mac watched as all but four of the agents climbed back aboard the truck, which then rumbled toward the main road to Nord. The four agents turned and strolled down the access road toward his house.

"Shit," he muttered. Mac lowered his binoculars and rested his back against the tree. "This is going to get messy."

He was about to push away from the tree and head for the main road when he heard a branch snap in the distance, opposite the agents.

Mac sank to one knee and brought his rifle to his shoulder. He scanned the slope ahead of him and waited. Somebody was out there.

His heart hammered away in his chest. It had to be a trap. The agents in the truck had distracted him long enough to drop off the men behind him while others circled around from the west.

It took longer than he'd expected—they were cautious—but he

finally caught a glimpse of movement to the west.

He spotted three men wearing winter camo picking their way along, carrying what looked like bolt-action hunting rifles. Mac blinked and focused on the three men again.

That doesn't seem right...

They weren't wearing dark jackets emblazoned with federal agency logos, like the others. These newcomers looked more like hunters than agents.

Another man appeared behind the first three and another... another. Seven men in total worked their way as a loose squad down the hill, under the direction and able leadership of the point man. The leader used hand signals to direct his men and spread them out into an arrowhead formation as they walked straight toward Mac.

Mac knew two things straightaway: one, they didn't know he was there, and two, they were definitely not with the agents.

The men before him walked along in what looked like military formation using military hand signals, but that was where the similarity ended. Half the men looked overweight, and clumsy. They snapped branches and one actually stumbled and fell as they moved down the ravine. The others looked completely at home in the woods and in their element.

What the hell is going on here?

Mac slowly turned his head and risked a glance back across the valley toward where the agents walked along the road. Up close, he realized they looked less like agents than he'd first thought.

Two of them sported scraggly beards, and none of them walked with the sure cockiness of someone working for the federal government in a law enforcement capacity. They ambled along, two of them talking and one of them joked. Laughter echoed from the four men on the road.

Mac turned back to see that the seven newcomers creeping down the hill had stopped. The point man had finally spotted the agents. He flashed urgent hand signals to the others, and they all lowered to the ground.

Oh shit! Those guys aren't with the feds—they've got to be buddies of Vance's! I'm going to be caught in the crossfire!

The earbud in Mac's gear chose that moment to break squelch with Jay's voice. "Iceman! Iceman, this is Mongoose. If you're reading me, we're still on the move. Everyone accounted for and okay. The...let's just say the delivery date has been adjusted...we're aiming for..."

The signal faded. Mac leaned forward, willing the radio to break squelch again. *Come on...*

"Looks like a two-day delivery at this point. Over."

Two days...

Mac looked at the seven militiamen all aiming weapons at the agents on the road below.

Now what am I going to do?

CHAPTER 10

JAY UNFOLDED HIMSELF FROM the pile of supplies that had crashed into the front seat with him on impact. He wiped blood from the stinging cut on his cheek.

“Everyone okay? Leah! Are you okay?”

After a round of muttered curses and grunts from the rear of the car, his daughter replied. “Yeah...great, I’m doing just fine.”

“Ow—that’s my foot, man!” complained Hunter from the rear.

“Sorry!” called out Thom.

“Kate?” Jay asked. He blinked through the dust from the airbag and the blinking lights on the dash.

His wife put a hand to her forehead and leaned back in the driver’s seat, pushing the deployed airbag out of her way. She coughed, then nodded.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m okay. Holy shit...”

“Guys, I think we better keep moving...” Leah mumbled.

“Come on, we have to get going, Kate,” Thom said, helping Leah sit up in the backseat. They moved several boxes out of the way and handed a bag of clothes to Hunter.

“Jay, can you reach my knife?” asked Kate. “I can’t find it and this damn airbag is in the way,” she said, struggling to push the balloon in her face to the side.

“Hang on,” Jay replied, bending forward despite the sharp pain in his back. He grunted, found her knife on the floor among the debris at his feet and handed it to her. “That certainly didn’t do anything to help my back,” he muttered leaning back in his seat and sighing.

“Guys open your doors,” Kate said. When the rear doors opened, she kicked hers open then plunged the knife deep into the airbag, releasing a cloud of gas and dust.

“Nobody breathe!”

Leah coughed.

“Okay, everybody out,” Jay said. They exited the vehicle and found themselves inside a paint store.

Jay limped across broken glass to his daughter and brushed the dust out of her hair. “Are you okay?”

She nodded and wiped the lock of hair off her forehead. “Dad, you don’t look so good. Is your back hurt?”

“I’ll be fine, it was just a shock, that’s all.” Jay straightened and knuckled his lower back.

Kate coughed from the other side of the car. "We don't have much time, guys." She coughed again. "Thom, can you help me clear some of this crap away from the front of the car?"

As Thom moved to help Kate, an idea struck Jay. "Leah, Hunter—grab as many cans of bright paint as you can. Not the stuff with the fancy lids, see if you can find the ones with the twist-off caps."

"What?" asked Hunter.

"They don't have to be big," Jay continued, "and if they're plastic, even better."

"Why are we looking for paint, Dad?"

"You trying to redecorate, man?" Hunter quipped as he moved into the darkened store. Leah dutifully crunched off into the store.

"Shouldn't we be getting the hell out of here?"

Jay took a few steps from the car and paused to listen. He heard revving engines and squealing tires coming from two different directions in the distance.

"The people back there at that roadblock are gonna be looking for us. You saw how many of them had weapons...we can't fight back, but maybe—"

"Whoa! I found the motherlode, man!" Hunter appeared from the other side of an aisle, both hands raised and carrying a pair of quart jugs full of red paint.

"There's a whole bunch of different colors...you got a preference, Mr. Leah's Dad?"

"Jay, we're almost done!" warned Kate from outside the store.

"It doesn't matter—just grab as many as you can and get back to the car," he said to Hunter.

By the time Jay worked his way through the debris at the front of the store and climbed back in the Tahoe, the sound of engines down the street were plain for all to hear. "Hurry!" he called.

Kate slid back into the driver's seat and used her knife to slice away the deployed airbag, dropping it on the ground. She slammed the door and looked over her shoulder.

"You good?" she asked as Thom clambered aboard and took position in the backseat.

"All set!" Thom turned to the open door, facing the interior of the store. "Hurry up!"

Kate started the car as Leah cleared the last of the debris and waited for Hunter to get into the backseat. She passed all of her paint to Thom, then climbed in just as Kate hit the gas.

"That was a bit quick—" Jay started to complain.

"No time! There they are!" Kate announced, jerking a thumb over her shoulder. Jay turned and looked out at the mangled side view mirror hanging from his door. Three pairs of headlights winked into

existence at the far end of the street behind them. Another car turned the corner halfway between them and their pursuers.

“Shit...there’s four cars back there,” Jay said.

Leah struggled to close the door as Kate weaved. Thom had to hold on to her so she could shut it without falling out. Leah exhaled and adjusted her hair among half a dozen quarts of multicolored paint. “You could have given me a half second there, Kate.”

“No she couldn’t, man! Those guys are right on our asses!” said Hunter from the back. He slapped the rear window. “Go faster!”

“Hang on!” Kate hollered over the sound of the roaring engine. The Tahoe slalomed back and forth across the street seeking the edge of town.

“There’s so much crap in the road,” observed Thom.

“I hadn’t noticed,” Leah muttered as she crashed into the door when Leah jerked the wheel to the left.

“Are we still going north?” Kate demanded through her clenched teeth.

Jay glanced up at the rearview mirror and caught the glowing N in the corner. “According to the car, yes. As long as we keep going this direction, we’ll cross the border—”

In a shower of sparks, the side view mirror outside Jay’s window disappeared.

“Holy shit! They’re shooting at us, man!” cried Hunter.

Jay turned and looked over his seat. “Leah, Thom—get down!”

No sooner had he spoke than the rear window shattered as a round punctured the upper corner, showering Hunter in a cascade of glass.

“Hunter!” Jay yelled. “You okay?”

“Yeah! I just took a nice bath in glass,” he said, sitting up and spitting. “Whoa, they’re lot closer now, Mr. Leah’s Dad!”

Kate turned sharply to the left. “We’re heading northwest; now would be a good time to get those guys off my ass!”

Jay met Hunter’s eye. “Loosen the lid on that paint, then throw it out the window at that car. Think you can hit them?”

Hunter grinned. “I may not be a baseball player, but I sure as hell know how to throw shit out a car window when I’m being chased.”

Leah and Thom looked at each other. “I don’t even want to know,” muttered Jay as he sat back in his seat.

“Eat shit and die!” Hunter said as he lobbed a bucket of red paint out the rear window. Jay turned to watch as the plastic container hit the ground just in front of the car and splattered the road red. The men from the roadblock drove through it, the empty container bouncing off the front bumper without slowing them down.

“Well, that got the tires,” Thom said.

“Aim higher!” Leah suggested over the noise from the shattered

window. "Here," she said handing him a pre-loosened yellow container. "Try that one."

"Fire in the hole, *mi amigos!*" Hunter cried as he lobbed the second container out the window.

"Watch this," Kate said. Just as Hunter moved his arm forward to release, Kate hit the brakes and their Tahoe slowed just enough for the paint can to sail through the air and smash dead center onto their chase car's windshield.

One second Jay was watching the angry faces of the men inside the car, and the next the entire windshield went bright yellow. Kate hit the gas, and the pursuing car hit its brakes, causing the front end to swerve.

On a road littered with as much debris and abandoned cars as the one they traveled, that was a dangerous maneuver. The car behind them plowed head-on into an abandoned pickup truck, crumpling the front end and throwing its passengers through the yellow, shattered windshield.

Jay whooped in relief, then frowned as the three remaining cars swerved around the wreck of the first and continued without losing pace.

"We still got three more!" said Hunter. "Paint me!" He reached back a hand, waiting for Leah to deposit another container.

"This Bud's for you...bud!" Hunter yelled and lobbed the second paint bomb out the window. While it was still in midair, he took Tom's bucket and tossed that out as well.

The driver behind them reacted fast enough to avoid the first bucket, but swerved right into the second one, which exploded and covered half his windshield in blood red paint.

The car swerved again, clipped a light pole and careened across the street, taking out the car behind it as well. They collided in an explosion of glass and papers into the side of a dumpster.

"Just one more!" yelled Thom over the roar of wind through the open rear window.

"Oh *shit*," Kate said.

Jay turned his attention back to the windshield. He put both hands on the dash and winced at the pain in his palms. "Kids! Hang on!"

"What—" Leah started to say. Her words were cut off as Kate swerved around the corner and off the road to avoid a pileup of cars on the two-lane rural road. Jay stared out his window at the cars, all of them heading north, all of them abandoned, burned to the ground, or shot to hell.

The Tahoe kicked up rocks, dirt and snow as it rumbled along the shoulder, then down a slight embankment and across a drainage ditch.

"What the *hell!*" yelled Hunter from back. "We're losing shit out the

back window!" he cried as the Tahoe hit something and bounced. Jay looked over his shoulder and saw a box fly past Hunter, as he fumbled to grab it.

Squealing behind them announced their pursuers.

"They're right behind us again!" warned Thom.

"Creek!" Kate hollered.

"What?" asked Leah and Thom in unison.

Jay turned to the front in time to see the ground disappear beneath the Tahoe's hood. For a split-second he experienced gut-wrenching weightlessness. He closed his eyes and swallowed as Hunter let loose a rebel yell from the back.

In a shower of snow and dirt that flew up and covered their windshield, they landed on the far side of a shallow creek. Kate struggled with the wheel for a moment as Jay slammed into the window, grunting. The engine roared, the tires dug in, the rear of the Tahoe dropped with a teeth-jarring crunch and they sped up the bank back to the road.

Jay heard a crash and the engine roaring over the sound of the wind from the back. "What the hell happened?" he yelled.

Hunter laughed, wiping stringy hair from his face. "Those dudes *totally* face-planted back there by the creek!"

"He's right! The other car's hood must be three feet deep in the water!" confirmed Thom.

"That was fucking *awesome*, man!" Hunter yelled from the back. He laughed and threw another can of paint out the window in victory.

Jay turned and saw his wife gripping the steering wheel with white knuckles, her lips pulled back and her jaw clenched tight. Her eyes, wide and staring straight ahead, gave away her fear. Jay put a bandaged hand on her thigh and squeezed.

"We made it, it's okay, honey...we left them behind."

Kate blinked and her face relaxed. She turned and cracked a lopsided smile. With visible effort, she forced her shoulders to relax and peeled her hands from the steering wheel. As they regained the smooth, relatively clear blacktop, she nodded and swallowed.

"Okay," she whispered, then turned back to the road and licked her lips. "Okay."

"Hey, guys," said Leah, pointing between Jay and Kate. Jay followed her finger out the window, wondering what was next. A sign, half-burnt and resting on one wooden post, lay blocking one lane about a hundred feet ahead.

Leah smiled. "Welcome to Michigan."

If you liked this book, please consider taking a few moments to leave a review by clicking below. I value your opinion and love hearing from my readers. These days, independent authors live and die by their reviews. It's the only way we can compete with the Big 5—who would like nothing more than to price ebooks on par with traditional paperbacks. Your comments will help other readers decide if they want to read this book.

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(available August 11th, 2017)

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Author's Note

THIS IS A WORK of serialized fiction. What that means is I'm writing it and publishing it an episode at a time, like a TV show. Instead of waiting for me to write the entire book, you can read it as each section (or episode) is ready. Some people do not like this, so I will be releasing the entire season (episodes 1-5) as a book when everything is written. This is an experiment for me, to see if my readers prefer reading shorter installments or longer works, so please do let me know. You can email me at:

marcus@freeholderpress.com

The inspiration for this serialized story hit me after I happened upon a news story proclaiming the northern lights would be visible from my home in Wisconsin late last year. I stayed up half the night trying to spot them and photograph the elusive aurora to no avail. That got me thinking about solar flares, coronal mass ejections and the end of civilization.

I started researching and discovered the horrifying truth that our government not only knows about the threat posed by the sun, but doesn't take it very seriously. Oh, don't get wrong, they've created task forces and committees and sub-committees, but has anything actually been accomplished other than rule making and defining terms used in said rules? Nope. We're just as vulnerable as we were thirty years ago--perhaps even more so as we become ever-dependent on electricity and electric devices (you're reading this on an electric device, aren't you?).

So what's to be done? Other than pressuring politicians to spend the money now to harden our grid, not much. So I hope to--at least in some small way--use this serialized story to raise what awareness I can about the threat we face every day.

For more information, try a Google search for "July 2012 Solar Flare". Trust me, it's fascinating reading.

Also, check out the government's response here: <https://www.aip.org/fyi/2016/federal-government-preparing-impacts-space-weather-and-electromagnetic-pulses>. They're moving in the right

direction but the question remains: will it be enough, will it be in time?

Some states have taken the bull by the horns and forged ahead along. See this article from two years ago: <http://www.pressherald.com/2015/01/25/cmp-fortifies-maines-electric-grid-against-new-threats/>. Maine is leading the charge, proving that something can and should be done, *right now*.

After all, the next Solar Storm could happen any minute, any day, any time. The sun never rests—neither should we.

Marcus Richardson

March 16, 2017

Acknowledgments

I WOULD LIKE TO thank the usual suspects, my family, my friends, and most importantly, my wonderful wife.

I would also like to thank my ARC Team (a group of dedicated readers who get the first look at my books before they are published) and my long-time beta readers Rotag and Old Sarge. I want to especially thank Bob and Greg—without your valuable insights and encouragement—not to mention great typo catches!—I could not have finished this story. Well...I *could*, but it wouldn't be nearly as enjoyable to read!

I also want to take this opportunity to thank Indica Snow, queen of proofreading. She's helped me take my writing up to the level I've always wanted to reach and deserves a big THANK YOU. I'm not promising you I'll never yank you out of the story with some sort of inconsistency or bad grammar, but I can tell you it'll happen a lot less.

So if you find any mistakes it's her fault, not mine.

Just kidding—I take personal responsibility for each and every mistake, typo, and inaccuracy in this book. The fine people on my ARC Team, my beta readers, and Indica do yeoman's work in helping me root out the little buggers and bring a polished, more enjoyable manuscript to light. That said, I think it's nearly impossible to find each and every single mistake so I ask you, my readers, to contact me if you find anything—or even if you *think* you find something. You never know, you may end up on the acknowledgments page or even land a coveted spot on the ARC Team! I'm not above naming characters after people who've helped me out, either—there's all kinds of fun things that can be done for people who help me out.

Lastly, I would be remiss if I didn't mention that elements of the cover(s) were created using images licensed from [BigStock.com](https://www.bigstock.com) and the public images archives (specifically *Astronomy Image of the Day*) hosted by the great folks at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

THANK YOU one and all.

About the Author



Marcus attended the University of Delaware and later graduated from law school three years later. Since then, he has at times been employed (or not) as: a stock boy, a cashier, a department manager at a home furnishing store, an assistant manager at an arts and crafts store, an unemployed handyman, husband, cook, groundskeeper, spider killer extraordinaire, stay at home dad, and a writer.

Marcus writes post-apocalyptic thrillers full of high-octane action and lots of military hardware. You can read his *Future History of America Series* available exclusively on Amazon. He has also written and continues to write books in the *Wildfire Saga*. Several of his *Wildfire* books are also available as audiobooks! For a free sample, check out *The Source*, the first prequel in the *Wildfire Saga*.

The Source is available at all major ebook retailers for FREE.

Discover more about Marcus on the FAQ page of his website:

marcusrichardsonauthor.com

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